TAPPEI
NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY
SHINICHIROU
OTSUKA
20
Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-

Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-

"...Subaru can't be allowed to see this."
"—That's why we'll finish him off here and now."
"A servant of Marquis Roswaal L. Mathers—"
"Rem, at present, the helper of our one and only Subaru Natsuki, our most beloved who will someday become a hero. Wasn't that it?"

"Wa...it... Wait, Theresia!"
"No way. You're lying, right? Theresia? That's impossible...! It can't be Mom!..."
"That's enough."
The next moment, one man descended from the sky, landing gallantly before the reaper.

"Aww, I was rejected."
Casting aside the Dragon Sword, which she could no longer draw, Theresia picked up the longsword at her feet and charged.
"—Oh, a woman all alone in a place like this? That's quite brave."
"—Ngh."

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.

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VOLUME 20

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION: SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

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TAPPEI NAGATSUKI

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PROLOGUE

MOONLIT CAPRICCIO

1

The taste, the color, and the stench of blood consumed all of Garfiel's being.

The feeling of sinking into blood was vastly different from sinking into water. He couldn't move freely, like his body had been swallowed up by a viscous, not-quite liquid, and he could not see the bubbles of air escaping his mouth.

Even the white moon laughing at him from on high wasn't visible anymore.

At the height of his fight with Kurgan, a strange mass of blood had swallowed Garfiel whole.

His first thought was that the Archbishop of Lust had only ever been an amorphous blob of blood that may or may not even have been alive. This strange creature would have been shocking were it not for the fact that the city was already crawling with lifeless corpse soldiers and demi-beasts—brand-new threats that weren't even considered proper demon beasts. In that context, a slithering mass of blood was suddenly not all that inconceivable.

The problem was the precariousness of Garfiel's situation, as he was currently smothered by blood and quickly running out of air.

The viscous slime overwhelmed his senses of sight, taste, smell, and even hearing. As for touch, he found it impossible to feel anything to the left, right, front, or back. Since all five senses were unreliable, he had no choice but to fall back on his sixth sense.

It was Subaru who had taught him that term.

"—Ngh."

Idle thoughts. Idle thoughts. Idle thoughts. Garfiel had too

many idle thoughts. Even though he had noticed it himself so, so many times, even when temporarily freed from the yoke of gravity, his mind was still restrained by idle thoughts.

As long as his mind was preoccupied, he wouldn't be able to move his limbs at will. He clawed for anything to steady himself, wasting his precious remaining oxygen as his consciousness slowly sank deeper and deeper into the blood.

Victory, a breakthrough, resolution, and everything he desired slipped through his fingers and disappeared. At this rate, Garfiel would pass on in a pathetic, defeated death—

—The pink-haired woman he loved, the cat-girl with orange fur, that unreliable and yet utterly dependable black-haired boy.

In the midst of all the idle thoughts crossing his mind only to fade away, he saw the important things that he couldn't allow to slip through his fingers.

"Gaaaaaaaaah."

A light shone in his green eyes; his mouth opened, revealing razor-sharp fangs. Blood poured into his throat, filling his lungs, but he didn't care.

Howl. Howl and roar. Unsheathe your claws, your fangs.

Garfiel had too many idle thoughts. Because of that, even on the verge of death, his stubbornness, regrets, and obsessions continued to well up to the bitter end.

His arms and legs didn't have the strength to break the surface of the blood. His reach wasn't long enough. His body was too small. What if they were bigger…longer? What if his claws were sharper and stronger?

What then?

"—Nghhhh!"

Responding to his self-preservation instinct, Garfiel's body throbbed, and his flesh began to change.

His skeletal structure shifted, groaning audibly, his limbs visibly growing. His whole body was covered in golden fur; his claws and fangs grew bigger, stronger, sharper.

The power of the blood he had possessed from birth transformed Garfiel Tinzel into a wartiger, allowing him to break through the wall of blood.

The moment his claws breached the surface, the gory mass popped like a bubble.

Garfiel understood instinctively that he had killed it. His claws had torn away whatever life had been imbued within the mass of blood.

Blood spattered everywhere, staining the street and buildings all around him a hideous crimson. Exhaling a wild, bloody breath and finally free from the pain of drowning in gore—

“

“—Oooooagh!”

Garfiel roared as he tore into the approaching enemies with his claws.

The head of the first demi-beast exploded, splattering blood and brains all around. However, the rest of the throng stepped over its corpse without hesitation, an army of beasts marching to its death at the tiger’s violent claws.

The swarm of demi-beasts did not hesitate to throw themselves to their death in a battle they had no hope of winning. Their ability to sense danger was totally numb, and their sense of self-preservation was nonexistent.

These were twisted, warped beings whose dignity had been trampled.

Garfiel had no idea how they had come to be this way, but there was one thing he understood on an instinctual level: They had to be destroyed.

It wasn’t hatred or contempt that drove him to this conclusion, but a powerful sense of duty. They needed to be put down.

“

enemy. And so the bloody fate that awaited them remained unchanged as well.

“—Ngh!”

Garfiel roared as he swung his claws, but it was stopped by Kurgan’s three left arms. The stone pavement beneath them cracked as Garfiel’s other set of claws clenched around the defenseless torso of a demi-beast.

“

feet firmly on the ground, Garfiel unleashed the full power of his blessing of the earth spirit, causing the ground beneath Kurgan to swell and raise his body upward.

“

like in the plaza, there were demi-beasts lying in wait inside the tower, but they had no hope of breaking through the storm of destruction.

Kicking the floor and the walls alike, Garfiel used the whole interior of the tower to assault Kurgan from every direction. Meanwhile, Kurgan stood firm and unmoving, deflecting the claws and fangs flying at him with his hardened body while steadily returning powerful attacks.

Meeting a punch with a kick of his own, Garfiel was sent flying into the upper levels of the tower. Crashing through the stone ceiling, he violently burst into the next floor and finally reached the top of the tower.

"This is…"

It was the place he had set out to reach from the very beginning.

Without realizing or intending it, he had arrived at what had been the goal of the plan. As luck would have it, the Archbishop of Lust, whom he needed to defeat, was nowhere to be found.

As he stared in wonder, Garfiel understood what was going on at last.

The Sword Saint and Eight-Arms, the demi-beasts filling the tower and the plaza— it was all for show.

Lust had sneered at their counterattack, leaving behind bait to make it look like she was still there. Garfiel's heart burned as he remembered Lust's maliciousness and her repulsive broadcast.

Capella had abandoned the tower and disappeared to who knew where. And she would show up in the worst possible place right as everyone was hoping for a grand reversal.

"Monster…!"

Cursing, Garfiel reached for his waistcloth. It had not come undone while he was transformed or during the intense battle, and the conversation mirror was still stored there.

Determined to warn the people who had stayed behind at the government building, he touched the mirror's face with a finger—

"—?!"

An arm reached up through the floor, grabbed his leg, and started pulling him back below.

He steadied himself against the stone floor, but it had already begun to crack, unable to maintain its integrity. The floor shattered and fell away, revealing Kurgan's lifeless eyes.

Garfiel jerked to the side as his head slammed into the tower wall. Blood and tears flowed from his head as he swung his leg up with incredible force. This time, it was Kurgan who shot into the wall with a resounding *crash*. By this point, the tower was half-destroyed.

As the pair continued plummeting, they kept hammering each other.

“

his feet.

“Haah, haah…”

Breathing raggedly, he gritted his teeth when he saw Kurgan’s unchanged stance.

How many times had he ignored the opportunity to finish off Garfiel? He had not used the Devil Cleavers sheathed on his back even once.

Garfiel burned at the humiliation, his pride and confidence as a warrior shattered.

If he was going to be that pitiful, then dying would almost be better.

Just as he thought that—

“It’d be easier…if you just ended it.”

Adjusting his shields, he raised both of his arms, baring his cracked fangs and steeling himself.

Garfiel had too many idle thoughts. Even now, he was still hearing several voices.

Warm and friendly voices. Familiar and comforting voices. Voices that made his heart ache and his throat burn. Voices that made his eyes soften in pride and made strength well up from inside him.

He could hear them calling his name.

“—Grr.”

I have to go. I have to make it. I have to reach him.

A powerful urge thrummed in his chest. Garfiel cracked a smile as his eyes gleamed.

“

2

A flash of sparks erupted as if the moonlit blades were splitting the night itself.

“Hya!”

A shout echoed through the night as the Sword Devil’s two blades drew an arc of death. There was not a trace of play in any of the countless slashes; each was the pinnacle of a sword fighter’s art —a demonstration of such masterful technique that fellow disciples of the blade would have been entranced by its beauty even as they headed off to their deaths.

“

Though he deflected a lightning-fast thrust that would have originally penetrated his skull, Wilhelm still felt a burning heat erupt from his forehead.

It did not matter whether the disturbance lasted less than the blink of an eye; any distraction would be lethal in this sword fight, which transcended the capabilities of mere mortals.

The blood flowing from the fresh wound trickled down, tracing his eyelid and ever so slightly impairing his field of vision. The Sword Saint's next sword thrust approached at a speed that made the air scream like it was crying out in pain.

It was death. The longsword closed in on his torso. He could already picture a humiliating, inescapable death where his blood and viscera helplessly spilled out.

Those would be his final moments on the path of the sword that he had walked his entire life. It would all slip away before he had a chance to atone.

—There was no way he could accept an end like that.

"Ooooooooaaaaaah!!!"

Roaring, he rejected the bloody end that flashed through his mind.

Condemning that vision to the flames, Wilhelm felt his blood boil. Time seemed to slow as his focus intensified, making sound, color, and everything other than his opponent fade from the world.

The approaching blade followed the path he had envisioned, hurtling directly at his torso.

Just before it reached, he pushed off the ground with enough force to crater the stone pavement and spun himself in the air just over the deadly slash.

"

The Sword Devil—Wilhelm—wrapped his suit coat around his waist, staunching the fresh wound. The Sword Saint paused her attacks and didn't make any attempt to press him further.

Wilhelm touched his wound, admonishing himself for his faint hope that there might be some trace of emotion in her hollow and blue doll-like eyes.

"I'm not under any illusion that there will be a chance to say a proper farewell, and I have no expectation of the heavens being especially generous. We will have plenty of time to enjoy ourselves on the other side. This is no place to lose myself in idle fantasy. This is reality."

He stared at the corpse soldier wielding the techniques it possessed in life. The long, lustrous red hair, the smooth, pale-white skin, and the beautiful blue eyes that seemed to contain the sky—if he closed his eyes, countless heartwarming memories welled up in his mind. He would never get tired of reliving them.

And now it was all there right before him where it had no business being.

"You are beautiful, Theresia. And that's why you should not be here."

Confronted by a copy of his lost wife, Wilhelm reassumed a fighting stance. His sword seemed even more honed than before.

His blood boiled in undying anger at the villain who had made this happen.

But in that one moment, that brief instant, that single clash, he did not need any single idle distraction.

He recalled the words of his old friend, of his partner, of his wife.

Don't let your anger lead your sword astray. Even if your blood is boiling. Be like the straightest steel.

"How about now? Getting hot under the collar?"

"No, I'm as cold as the steel of a sword."

Without any signal, their blades flashed again as they resumed their death match.

The echo of steel on steel cried out like a scream, a prayer, and a confession of love all at once. It sounded like a wish for closure all while hoping that the end would never arrive.

The Sword Devil and the Sword Saint's duel continued to ring out like whispered words of love.

3

Julius Juukulius was Lugunica's Finest Knight.

Though his words and actions were often misunderstood, he was certain that people were fundamentally good.

It was his sincere belief that everyone had a reason for doing what they did, and the underlying cause of misdeeds was often due to the environments in which they occurred. Consequently, he had imagined that every individual had some goodness in them.

It was an idealism that could be called immature, even naive.

Julius's friends and family often worried because of that side of him, but they also loved him for it. And Julius responded to the concerns and expectations of those around him to the best of his abilities.

Julius was a good person. A person who loved people and was beloved by people.

That was why for him, the existence of Archbishops like Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti and other cultists who committed evil acts without any remorse was unpardonable. They were villains who defied explanation or understanding.

To Julius, the Witch Cult was something that shook the very foundation of his knight's resolve.

"—El Clauzeria!"

Borrowing the power of the six different greater spirits, a rainbow of light erupted from the tip of his sword.

Aiming for a quick resolution to the battle, he attacked Gluttony without holding back.

The six strands of overlapping light were a magical composition that Julius had come up with using his skill and a certain idea he had gotten from Roswaal, whom he considered to be the top court magician. This spell had been refined to the point that the light it produced could pierce any and all defenses no matter what form it took—Clarista when imbuing his sword with power and Clauzeria when erupting in a ray.

Those two trump cards were a major part of why Julius was counted among the kingdom's greatest knights.

It was obvious at a glance that this iridescent beam was dangerous, and anyone foolish enough to think they could survive getting hit by it would not live long enough to regret their mistake.

This was what Julius used in his attempt to eliminate Gluttony and all the doubts lingering in his breast.

"What?!"

"—Surprisingly, you have a bit of a soft spot and tend to avert your eyes from unpleasant things, Brother."

Gluttony, Roy Alphard, was sneering as he bent over backward, just barely dipping under the deadly beam as he scornfully addressed Julius. The ray of light flew fast and true like a speeding arrow. Dodging it required reflexes on par with Reinhard or—

"We idolized you, Brother. There's no way we wouldn't know the magic that you worked so hard to develop!" Immediately after evading Julius's attack like he knew it was coming, Alphard leaped up into the air.

"Blah, blah, blah! You can laugh all ya want on the other side!"

Ricardo swung his sword toward the Archbishop's childlike body.

Alphard dexterously wielded the short swords peeking out from his long sleeves to catch and skillfully deflect the attack. There was a flash of sparks as Ricardo's blade passed right beside him and split the stone floor.

The Archbishop of Gluttony seemed to be enjoying himself as his short swords flashed while stone fragments filled the air.

"You have to skewer dog meat! For tough, muscled meat, you have to poke, poke, poke until it's nice and soft and easy to eat and easy to digest and easy to turn into a nutritious fertilizer! The cycle of life! Ahh, it's so, so, so beautiful! I can't get enough of it! You get it, right, Ricardo?!"

"Ngh, gah! Whoa?!"

Alphard ranted as his small body spun, slashing at Ricardo. Given the size difference, Ricardo was at a significant disadvantage fighting the small cultist. His wiry fur and thick muscle provided some degree of protection from blades, but there was no denying he was in a tight spot.

And more than anything, Alphard's attacks were tenacious and precise, almost unreasonably perfect.

High-speed thrusts kept landing where Ricardo's fur was thinnest and where his muscles were not thick enough to ward off the damage, steadily whittling his strength. Seeing the warrior being toyed with stunned Julius.

That sort of skill was not something that could be learned in a

single lifetime. It was the technique of a true master.

"Fall back, Ricardo! Ire! Alo!"

Intervening, Julius gave new instructions to his spirits. The fire spirit Ire and the wind spirit Alo coated his sword as he attacked Alphard from the side with a blazing slash.

"There we go, that's the teamwork we expected!"

"Wha—? Agh?!"

However, Alphard responded with ease, hitting Julius in the stomach with a backward kick so precise that it was like he had eyes in the back of his head.

Julius groaned in pain as he was sent flying. Meanwhile, Ricardo got a kick in the chin from the front. Alphard clearly wanted to put some distance between them.

"Nice, nice. Things are getting fun now! Brother! And Ricardo! We're putting up such a good fight against the both of them! This is a never-before-seen view! A new peak! Unreachable and unknowable! A world we had given up on! Ahh, no fair, no fair, no fair!"

"…What in the world are you babblin' about, you creepy runt?! The way you talk and what you say and everything else about you is aggravatin' as hell!"

Though he was bleeding an alarming amount, Ricardo erupted at Alphard's unending stream of nonsense. Julius couldn't help but agree as he caught his breath and steadied himself once more.

Something about Alphard's prattle rubbed Julius the wrong way.

"It was the same during the battle at the government building. In fact, it's even more incomprehensible now, but that just means we should simply ignore your attempts to manipulate us."

"And yet Ricardo is exactly the sympathetic sort of dumb-dumb who's too curious for his own good, and deep down, so are you, aren't you, Brother? We know the truth!"

"—Then judge for yourself!"

Alphard clapped provocatively as Julius dropped close to the ground before charging.

"Hey, wait! Don't go kickin' things off without me, Julius!"

"Just stay back and don't do anything reckless until your bleeding stops!"

Holding his sword in front of him, Julius directed his water spirit, Qua, to heal Ricardo, doing two, three different things at

once.

Julius was clearly advancing with greater speed and force than the previous attack—

"Ha-ha-ha! That's all… Oh?"

Alphard sneered as he parried with his blade, but his expression tensed when he felt something unexpected. As their swords groaned, Julius extended his leg and caught Alphard in the stomach. Payback for the previous kick.

The direct hit launched Alphard into the air. The villain was stunned as he landed on all fours and stared at Julius.

"Uwaaaah! What?! What was that just now, Brother?!"

"I imbued my body with Ine and my sword with Ness. The result is a combination of the light's physical enhancement and the diminishing nature of darkness. You haven't seen that before, right?"

"…Hee-hee-hee, that's right! The genius of hard work from the Finest Knight! You're overflowing with charm that we still don't know about!"

"—?!"

Alphard's cheeks turned red as he gazed at Julius in sublime rapture. Julius froze as his opponent dropped his short swords. There was a loud *clatter* as they hit the floor. And then Alphard's small heel cracked the stone floor.

"—Eclipse."

Alphard closed the distance in the blink of an eye, twisting his hips to thrust his palm forward with terrifying strength. Julius reflexively blocked it with his left arm, but the force of the blow penetrated his arm and hammered his chest.

"Agh."

The step forward and twisted hip transmitted a great deal of power into the palm thrust. The penetrating power dealt internal damage as Julius's thin frame literally crumpled and went flying backward.

"This strike has slain eighty-eight other pretty boys… Did you feel it in the marrow of your bones, Brother?"

Alphard was breathing hard with an oddly excited grin as he watched Julius tumble. Ricardo moved to catch him, but—

"Ngh?! What the hell?!"

Ricardo groaned as he poured his strength into his legs, just barely managing to stop Julius's flight. He hammered Julius's back,

forcing him to cough up the clotted blood filling his throat and lungs.

"Gah, ack!"

"Spirit! Forget me and take care of Julius! Don't hold back!" Ricardo's desperate call summoned a blue light that shrouded Julius, showing that the healing had begun. Standing in front of his fallen friend, Ricardo raised his sword and faced off against Alphard again. "Youuuu…"

"Welcome back! A snack? An appetizer? Or. Are. You. Dinner?"

Alphard grinned creepily as he held his hands up. Ricardo's fur stood on end.

As Alphard took up a position with his back to the waterway, the water swirled behind the Archbishop, rising from the surface like a water dragon's neck.

"Heh-heh-heh."

"Weapons, martial arts, and now magic? …What the hell are you?"

"We are but a poor, insignificant, unknown mage. A social outcast unloved even by our family. Was that how it went?"

Alphard laughed as the magical torrent bared its fangs at Ricardo.

It was just a mass of water drawn from the canal, but the force and amount were more than enough to crush and tear apart a person's body. And at the moment, Julius was behind Ricardo, meaning dodging was not an option.

With no other choice, Ricardo steeled himself for the impact.

"Wah-ha!"

He thrust the big sword into the ground and braced himself against the blast as he shouted.

The sonic attack that Mimi and her brothers used together was actually Ricardo's creation. His was the original, and unlike the siblings, he could pull it off by himself. It wasn't any weaker than theirs—if anything, his version was stronger—but he didn't have anyone to share the workload with, meaning the burden was far heavier on him.

Clinging to the sword as his body creaked, Ricardo endured the deluge with a destructive shout.

"Wooow, that was amazing."

The awestruck response faded as the enormous amount of water dissipated in a heavy curtain of mist. Without the deadly

momentum driving it forward, the torrent became a simple rain that fell over the plaza as Ricardo knelt in a puddle of water.

Blood seeped from the corner of his cut-up mouth as he breathed raggedly.

"I ain't hurt like this…agh…in a while, ya little shit."

"Wow, wow, wow! It's been a long time since anyone survived that! We can't even remember the last time it happened! Great, great, great, great, great, great, great!"

"That's enough of your babbling."

Julius stepped forward to stand next to the exhausted Ricardo. He seemed calm and restored as he interrupted Alphard's ranting. His face was pale, and his knight's clothes were stained with his own blood. His breath was ever so slightly unsteady, and no one could look at him and claim he was at full strength. However—

"It seems I saddled you with quite the bothersome chore, Ricardo."

"You're damn right you did. You better be sure to tell our lady just how hard I worked when we're done here. I'm gonna need some extra compensation to make up for this."

"In this matter, you can rest assured that my voice is your voice."

Adjusting his grip on his knight's sword, Julius patted Ricardo's shoulder before looking once more at Alphard. The villain noticed and smiled, his cheeks twisting as a perverse gleam filled his eyes.

His expression, his words, his way of fighting—it was disconcerting to the extreme, as if the cultist had cobbled them together from random pieces. Or perhaps that was the nature of the darkness that possessed the Archbishop of Gluttony.

"Why do you immerse yourself in evil despite having mastered the sword, martial arts, and even magic? With that much strength, surely you could have found another way."

"Oh, is it time for counseling now? Another way? And pray tell, what sort of path are you imagining, Brother?"

Being called this cultist's brother over and over was raising Julius's hackles.

Those words gained a darker significance in Julius's mind every time Alphard repeated it in that fawning tone, running his gaze over the knight's skin like a lurid tongue and acting overly familiar all the while.

It was undeniably an odd reaction.

—I don't have any relatives who would address me this way.

"Perhaps a knight. Perhaps a mercenary. Perhaps even a hero. Power without conviction can easily be corrupted by evil. Unchecked strength can easily lead to mindless violence. Which is all the more reason—"

"We were sure you'd say that! We knew you would say that, Brother! The elder brother we know, the elder brother we believe in, would surely say that!"

Without warning, Alphard interrupted Julius and lunged forward.

Julius immediately raised his sword, batting aside the oncoming kick. He could only assume there was a metal plate in the sole of the cultist's shoe, because there was a stiff rebound when his blade landed and it failed to cut through.

Alphard spun, unleashing a furious dance of kicks, putting Julius on the defensive.

"Do you remember when we were kids? We were so frail, Brother, and one time we fell ill, we asked you for an abble from the tree in the yard, did we not?!"

Alphard's words were incomprehensible, but his voice was verging on tearful.

Deflecting an unending stream of attacks with his sword, Julius furrowed his brow at Gluttony's repulsive behavior. What was his goal? What was he attempting? Was he hoping to use a made-up story as a simple distraction?

Or was this entire line of thought playing right into Gluttony's machinations?

"We were still small, and you said you couldn't do it! Do you remember? I guess you don't? But the more you said no, the more we wanted an abble! Do you know why? You don't, do you?"

"What…what are you talking about?! I don't… I don't recall anything like that!"

Julius cried out desperately as he defended against Alphard's onslaught, which came from all sides. His arm was going numb, and he could feel every impact because his organs were still hurting from before. The taste of iron quickly filled his mouth. But it wasn't because he was coughing up blood—Julius was biting his lip hard. An urge was building inside him.

For some unknown reason…he found it impossible to ignore Alphard's wild fantasies.

“It’s because of what happened next that we—that you—!”

“Ngh!”

“We always, always thought it! We always felt it! We are different! We are nothing but baggage! And what of it?! How about now?! We feel amazing! Was this how it felt to you?! I bet it felt great! We finally understand!”

“I don’t understand anything about you!”

Julius erupted at Alphard’s continued rambling. He dropped his defensive stance and went on the offensive. Slashing and thrusting as he advanced, he pressed the attack with his sword and kicks as Alphard’s stance broke down.

His strikes were imbued with an indescribable rage and hostility he could not place. Julius sliced off some of Alphard’s long hair when Alphard was a little too slow. However, it was foolish of him to only watch for the sword.

“Buds!”

Responding to Julius’s call, the spirits that were linked with him twinkled.

The six quasi-spirits’ beautiful gleam enveloped Julius, who channeled their strength to shroud his blade in light to destroy his enemy. This was the rainbow blade imbued with all six elements of magic—the very same attack that had defeated the Archbishop of Sloth.

“This is the end!”

Certain of his victory, Julius bore down on Alphard. He thrust straight at the center of Alphard’s chest—

“Ultimate palm.”

Alphard brought his black hands together right in front of him, catching the edge of Julius’s sword and shattering it into pieces.

The steel crumbled, and his lethal thrust lost all momentum.

However, the streak of multicolored light continued forward toward the enemy.

“Twilight mage.”

A glimmer of magic unfolded behind Alphard, swallowing up the beam. It was intercepted by a spell that sported the exact same color. The two completely canceled each other out.

On top of that, having lost his means of attacking, Julius widened his eyes.

“Twin blade serpent.”

Alphard used his toes to flick the short swords he had thrown

away before. It had been his plan all along to pretend that Julius's fierce charge had pushed him back, leading them right to where the swords had been lying on the ground. Catching the spinning blades in both hands, the Archbishop surged forward like lightning.

A storm of slashes assailed Julius even as he immediately raised his broken blade.

—It was as if all the days Julius had spent training, all the hard work he had put in as a knight, and everything else he had built up in his life had just been broken in half.

"—You got the abble for us, Brother. That's why we hated you."

With a tearing sound, an arm was severed at the elbow, flying into the air before finally thudding to the ground.

CHAPTER 1

A HIDEOUS BANQUET

1

The Water Gate City Pristella had a neighborhood known as Canal Street filled with winding, narrow waterways.

The battle that had begun in the plaza at the center of Canal Street was in the process of reaching an unexpected conclusion.

"Agh! Ahhhhhh?!"

Ferocious water dragons leaped over Otto's head and tore into Batenkaitos.

The snakelike water dragons were as large as a small boat, and the childlike Batenkaitos was mobbed by several different dragons, disappearing in the blink of an eye.

"Water dragons are merciless hunters."

Otto Suwen watched the ferocious scene with cold eyes.

—Ordinarily, water dragons were wild and not easily won over. Ironically, a big reason why Otto had been able to trick the ferocious water dragons was thanks to Wrath's authority.

The Archbishop's ability, which was spread all over the city, warped the emotions of everyone it touched in a feedback loop, amplifying and spreading panic, confusion, and suspicion all throughout the city. Subaru had used his performance in order to bolster people's courage and resolve using that same phenomenon, and Otto had taken advantage of it with his blessing of language to spur the water dragons to action.

"Wrath's Authority is quite the thing. It even affects the wildest residents of the city."

Water dragons hunted by biting into their prey and then twisting and turning to tear away chunks of meat. When someone

as small as Batenkaitos was caught by multiple water dragons, there usually wasn't anything left when they were done eating.

"Whoa! That's crazy! Did you do that?!"

Felt rushed over to him exultantly as the gruesome scene played out. Her follower was shrinking back at the bloody display, but Felt clearly had nerves of steel.

"I simply gave the angry water dragons a target. This is the natural order of— Owwwww!"

"Heh, not too bad for someone who looks so timid! Gonna have to look at you in a whole new light!"

Felt laughed as she slapped Otto's back. He grimaced as the group in white cloaks—Kiritaka's personal force, the White Dragon's Scale—also came over to him.

Their leader, Dynas, raised his hand.

"You really helped us out there, I'm ashamed to say. I won't pry into how you managed to command the water dragons…"

"I'd appreciate that. Also, about Mr. Kiritaka…"

"We will assuredly find the young master."

Dynas's response was emphatic. Otto was a bit worried about that intensity.

Most likely, his emotions were being heavily influenced by the combination of Wrath's Authority and Subaru's earlier speech. Put bluntly, Subaru's medicine had been a little too effective for people with a powerful sense of duty.

It didn't just apply to Dynas, either. All the members of the White Dragon's Scale were affected—

"—You can't just write it off as getting a little hot under the collar." Felt was frowning as she interrupted his thoughts, almost like she could read his mind. To his surprise, she ran her hand through her beautiful blond hair. "I heard it, too. There's no denyin' that speech lit a fire in my belly. But that doesn't mean everyone's just riding that high."

"Are you saying they actually are thinking calmly and logically about the most likely chance of success?"

"Nah, nothin' that smart. But everyone's got a right to stake their life for something that matters to them. So don't write that off so soon."

Dynas averted his eyes. Seeing that, Otto had no response. Felt's argument hit home hard. Especially so for Otto, since he tended to prioritize the logical.

“Understood. Then their actions make sense. So why are you here, Lady Felt? And what happened to Sir Heinkel?”

“I left Camberley to watch that piece of crap. Me and Gaston are going to get something we left at the inn.”

“Something you left at the inn?”

If she was prioritizing retrieving an item at a time like this, then it had to be incredibly important. Just like how Otto had prioritized securing the remnants of the Tome of Wisdom.

“Yeah, that’s right. A secret weapon our sorcerer gave me. Apparently, it’s a pretty powerful metia, but—”

“Wait just a moment, please.”

Before she could finish, Otto interrupted her. For a second, she looked suspicious, but an instant later, she noticed the hideous roar emanating from below the plaza. But even before she heard it, the repulsive cries had reached Otto’s ears.

“—It seems like you’re someone who can entertain us a bit more than expected, but just a bunch of water lizards is not very satisfactory. A gourmet like us has standards when it comes to appetizers.”

And breaking through the cries was a voice that scorned everything in the world.

There was a change in the ball of water dragons swarming around their prey. The ferocious scene of predator and prey had flipped at some point—

“…Lady Felt, how reliable is that metia you mentioned?”

“From what Old Man Rom and Ezzo said, even Reinhard wouldn’t be unscathed if he took a hit from it.”

“Ha-ha, that’s a nice and easy-to-grasp metric. Understood.”

Otto nodded at the convenient standard that Reinhard made.

“Then the White Dragon’s Scale and I will stall for time. Use that opportunity to retrieve that metia.”

“…What, and smash that freak with it? Can you buy that much time?”

“We’ll give it our all. Beyond that, it’s down to how fast you are, I suppose.”

“Heh, no problem, then—Gaston!”

Grinning at Otto’s response, Felt called to the big guy at her side. To Gaston’s surprise, Felt put her fist to his stomach.

“Stay here with them. You and those guys in white should listen to whatever the green guy says. And you don’t have permission to

die before I get back."

"Felt…that's…"

"I ain't runnin' away. Got a problem with that?"

Despite the difference in their builds, Gaston was overwhelmed by Felt's direct, honest gaze. Then he nodded.

"Got it. Make it quick, ma'am. It's about time I stepped onto the big stage, right?"

"Ha, good joke! All right, I'm leavin' Gaston with you, so use him how you want."

"I'll gladly take you up on that. I'm not a big fan of 'the green guy' description, though…"

A swift decision. Decisiveness was the quality of a good leader. And Otto was grateful both for the demonstration of Felt's qualifications to lead and her decision-making.

"…I don't recall us saying we'd go along with any of this."

Dynas grumbled at being involved without any say, but even so, every member of his group readied their weapons and prepared to fight.

"—You're ready now, right?"

Just as they finished up their plans, the cries of the water dragons died out.

Otto clenched his jaw at the fact that the dragons had ended up becoming sacrificial pawns, and he watched the last of them grow still right as Gluttony wrested himself free.

There was an explosion that scattered chunks of flesh and blue dragon scales across the plaza. Walking away from that hideous scene of slaughter was a manifestation of evil that took the form of a small boy—

"Very nice. That's how it should be. Bravery and recklessness aren't the same, and desperation and persistence are totally different, too! We can see it on your face that you understand the difference now. You're finally worthy of a spot on our plate!"

Bathed in blood, Batenkaitos had a look of rapture on his face as he expounded on his unpleasant taste in food.

"Can't say I get it, since I grew up rummaging through scraps to eat, you foodie freak!"

Seeing that look on his face, Felt snarled as she threw her sword straight at him. Her aim was true, and while it hurtled toward Batenkaitos—

"—Gaston!"

“If I die ’cause of this, I’m gonna come back and haunt you!”

In sync with her throw, Gaston charged straight forward. Batenkaitos looked a little surprised by their coordination but still dealt with it calmly.

Picking the sword out of the air, he thrust it straight at Gaston’s chest.

“Ha-ha! Don’t get in the way, you…”

In a reverse grip, the sword flashed sharply toward Gaston’s broad chest—and then, in a total reversal of what seemed to be an inescapable death, the sword snapped.

Batenkaitos looked stunned, and Otto had the exact same reaction.

“My big guy’s pretty tough. He’s my armor, after all!”

“Mana flow, huh?! Not bad for a big clod!” Batenkaitos called out.

“Who you callin’ a big clod?!”

After the sword broke on his chest, Gaston used his momentum to thrust an open palm at Batenkaitos. Perhaps getting a bad feeling about the incoming attack, Gluttony took a big leap backward.

“The rest is up to you guys! Don’t go dyin’ on me!”

“Be careful!”

Sensing her chance had arrived, Felt set off and ran like the wind. Otto had heard she was confident in her speed, but it was still far faster than he had imagined. And she had the foresight to run up a wall and clamber to the rooftops to avoid being followed by any demi-beasts, too.

Seeing that, Otto mentally shortened the amount of time he was allotting for her to recover the metia and return.

“—Oh-ho-ho, I see. So it was that sort of plan.”

“You sure seem unconcerned for someone we’ve got right where we want them. You do realize there’s nothing great about where you are at the moment?”

The White Dragon’s Scale had slipped smoothly into position, completing the encirclement as Otto tried to provoke Batenkaitos. But Gluttony was unbothered, looking from person to person until he was facing Otto.

“With that girl gone, there’s…what? Three that Louis would like?”

The stench of blood clung to Batenkaitos’s breath as he sighed. He cast aside the broken sword and rolled up the sleeves of his

tattered cloak, revealing short swords hidden at his wrists.

Batenkaitos was only just getting started in this fight.

"…I've had to fight more than the average grunt this past year… What sort of merchant does that make me?"

Getting a healthy dose of impending, goose bump–inducing danger, Otto did his best to encourage himself as he let out a heavy sigh.

Despite his dreary comments, the look on his face was not nearly so pessimistic.

2

—The battle on Canal Street began to develop like a nightmare.

"Ha-ha! That's not gonna work! Nope, nope, noooope! What? Come on! What was that? Are you even trying?!"

"Ngh…"

A piercing laugh rang out as a small figure jumped this way and that with incredible agility, dominating the battlefield with his presence. Using every bit of his short limbs, Batenkaitos revealed a style of fighting that wasn't bound by the limits of common sense, overcoming the disadvantage in numbers by outpacing and outperforming his opponents.

"It's just one kid! Surround him and finish him off! Don't let him get away!"

"Yeah, it's just a brat! Catch him and tear him to pieces!"

There was a grim determination in Dynas's shout, but it was simply met by condescending laughter.

Scoffing at Dynas's directions, Batenkaitos rushed right into the group's encirclement. They unleashed a flawlessly coordinated attack, but—

"—Nope, you're full of openings."

—threading the needle through the gaps in their supposedly impervious attack, Batenkaitos spun around on the ground, defeating every attempt they made. His short leg slammed into one soldier's stomach while his blade tore into another person's arms, allowing him to break out of the encirclement.

"Ooooooaaahhh! Try this for size!"

Gaston mounted a frontal charge with both hands stretching out. Even Batenkaitos wouldn't emerge unscathed if a man who

shattered a blade with his chest landed a clean hit.

"Ha-ha! Still lively, ain'tcha, old man? I don't hate that!"

"I'm not that old ye… Wha?!"

He jabbed his fingernails into Gaston's side to interrupt him, but that didn't stop his charge. Just like with the sword, some sort of inexplicable defense technique nullified the force of Gluttony's fingers.

Gaston pressed on, trying to grab Batenkaitos's head—

"—Fist Lord's Strike."

"Ugh?!"

Batenkaitos mumbled something, and the moment his palm touched Gaston, the big man crumpled. He dropped to his knees, heaving from the unexpected blow. Batenkaitos looked down at him while he swung his sword at Gaston's unguarded neck.

"—Dona!"

With a snap of his fingers, Otto used the Earth magic he had picked up for self-defense to sling a stone at Batenkaitos's back. Gluttony evaded it easily without even looking.

The city was paved and filled with waterways, so Otto's Earth magic wasn't exactly in its element. But still, that distraction gave Gaston and the others a chance to recover.

Unfortunately…

"…The lack of a decisive finishing blow is more dire than I had expected."

Even viewed in the most favorable light, this couldn't really be called an even match.

It was clear they were at a disadvantage against Batenkaitos. And this was an unexpected encounter, so there wasn't much hope that some allies who'd successfully seized a tower might happen upon them and come to the rescue.

"Not that something that lucky would happen to me regardless."

Otto Suwen's life had been one marked by misfortune and unfairness.

As far as he was concerned, what little fortune he had been allotted had already been used up being born into a family that understood his troublesome blessing and in having been saved by Subaru and his companions when he was on the verge of being killed by an Archbishop.

Because of that, he wouldn't allow himself to get too upset

about passing misfortunes and refused to avert his eyes from the reality before him.

"There really isn't any choice but to stall until Lady Felt can come back with a solution…"

"Agreed. Incidentally, you can't instigate the water dragons again, can you?"

Dynas glanced at the pile of corpses at the other end of the plaza as he caught his breath.

Feeling a pang at the fate that had befallen the water dragons he had egged on, Otto shook his head. "That was all the ones I managed to persuade on my way here just in case. I could maybe go convince some more…if you felt like holding him off while I get away?"

"If you left now, we'd fall apart entirely. And I sincerely doubt the enemy would let you waltz off, either."

"…Honestly, that kind of attention is what I want to avoid the most."

Otto grimaced as his shoulders slumped dejectedly.

Batenkaitos's heated gaze had been crawling all over Otto throughout the intense engagement. It was a dubious honor to have met the Archbishop's exacting standards.

Gaston and Dynas were the other two who had apparently qualified for a place on Batenkaitos's plate.

"It's not particularly appealing, but there is a chance that being underestimated will at least provide us an opening of some sort."

When it came to paths to victory and ways to make money, the more the better. Otto was merely applying that logic to this battle. Dynas laughed wryly in amazement.

"? What is it?"

"No, it's just, I'm not sure what else I expected from Lady Emilia's adviser. Looks like we can count on you as a leading expert on how to best serve up Archbishops."

"…I feel like everyone else has a different understanding of what exactly it is I do."

"You should probably just accept already that you're in a unique position."

Dynas shrugged as Otto looked up in resignation.

I thought I had already accepted my lot in life during the past year, even if I still have complaints about it. And what started this whole mess? It really is all Subaru's fault. I should let him really have it just

once after everything is over.

"But that can wait until we're out of the woods."

"Agreed. We're counting on you, Commander!"

With that, Dynas rejoined the fight with Batenkaitos. As Otto watched his courageous figure leap into the fray, his thoughts turned to the tactical situation—and as usual, the odds were terrible.

Their advantage in numbers was being totally overwhelmed by Gluttony's speed, and they were being steadily worn down by his antics.

"A bunch of grown adults can't catch a single kid even when they gang up?! Nope, nope, not good. Not good at all!"

Batenkaitos was laughing at them in their faces as he evaded them with pure footwork. His legs could change speed and direction on a dime while his upper body dodged all their attacks with an eccentric sway.

"What are those movements…?"

It almost looked like Gluttony's upper body and lower body were moving using entirely different techniques. While he feverishly tried to figure out what nightmarish reality he was confronting, Gaston was thrown clear.

"Damn it! What the hell is going on?! He's not just any little brat!"

Gaston wiped away an alarming amount of sweat as his breaths came in gasps. That unusual level of exhaustion was probably the price of his unknown technique.

"Have you noticed something?" Otto asked. "We need to change the balance of power, so anything you might have seen, no matter how small…"

"Does it look like I've got that much time on my hands?! That kid is freakin' good at fighting! Reinhard's a natural genius, but…"

"The fact that he can be compared to Sir Reinhard makes me want to just give up…"

They were, of course, talking about Felt's knight and the strongest person in the kingdom, the Sword Saint Reinhard van Astrea.

He had only been around him for a short while, but even a nonwarrior like Otto could feel in his bones how overwhelmingly powerful Reinhard was. If this cultist was even remotely comparable, then—

“Batenkaitos is the worst possible enemy, blessed with an innate genius?”

“…No, that ain’t it.”

“—? What do you mean?”

“I was trained up by a teacher where Reinhard’s from, so I kind of get it… This kid’s like that old man.”

“I’m not sure who you mean, but…”

“Those ain’t the moves of a genius. They feel like they’ve been forged in training.”

Gaston wiped away the sweat as Otto focused on Batenkaitos’s movements.

The Archbishop was still surrounded by the White Dragon’s Scale, leisurely parrying, evading, and dancing away from their swords. He even found the time to flourish with a little provocative bow.

But aside from that insulting gesture, his fluid movements were distinct from the violent aura he exuded. They looked too natural, which was what made them seem inconsistent.

Martial arts, swordsmanship, and countless other styles were all in harmony within that small frame.

“…Is that really possible for anyone other than Sir Reinhard?”

Otto’s suspicions only grew the longer he watched Lye Batenkaitos, the Archbishop who looked maybe thirteen or fourteen years old. Though he was a merchant first and foremost, Otto had trained in martial arts enough to protect himself, and he knew how much effort was involved. It was honestly still a painful memory.

Batenkaitos had perfectly mastered so many different things at such a young age. Doing that would have required either an inordinate amount of blood, sweat, and tears, or else—

“—The Archbishop of Gluttony.”

Suddenly, Otto shuddered as he repeated Batenkaitos’s title.

According to Subaru, Gluttony was a being who consumed the name and memories of others. What’s more, Otto also knew of the girl who had had everything taken from her and no longer remained in anyone’s memories.

But Otto had never given much thought to what became of whatever was eaten. It hadn’t felt real to him, so he had simply accepted the concept at face value without imagining what it might imply.

And if that was the true secret to Gluttony’s strength, then—

“—Tsk, tsk, tsk…”

Sensing another impending change in Gluttony’s fighting style from that chiding tone, Dynas and the others readied themselves. However, Otto noticed something about Batenkaitos’s movements since he was watching from a greater distance.

The next attack would not be a melee attack—

“Gaston!”

“—El Hyuma.”

Acting on instinct, Otto shouted just before Batenkaitos’s spell left his lips.

There was a *snap* as the atmosphere froze around them and a hail of ice poured down on the White Dragon’s Scale, who were caught off guard by the magical attack.

“Oooraaahhhh!”

Gaston leaped bravely into that furious storm of ice with both hands raised. Shielding the White Dragon’s Scale behind him, he let out a brave roar as he endured the furious hail. His impenetrable wall, which could stop blades and strikes, was now facing a storm of ice.

“All bark and no bite, eh?”

“Ngh…”

Batenkaitos stuck out his tongue in disappointment as Gaston dropped to his knees.

His face was sickly pale. Dynas and the others behind him had not emerged unscathed, either. Legs and backs sported fresh wounds, and several injured people were crouching over—they had lost around half of their fighting power.

On top of that, Otto’s worst-case scenario seemed to be coming true.

“From that reaction, I guess you’ve figured out our trick?”

“…Well now, I’m not sure I know what you are referring to.”

“You aren’t suited for these kinds of word games. Why don’t you give up on being a merchant before you hurt yourself?”

Scoffing at Otto’s painful attempt at misdirection, Batenkaitos pressed forward. In the blink of an eye, Gluttony closed the distance and touched the shoulder of one of the wounded soldiers behind Gaston.

“Hicks Faltman.”

“You…!”

Dynas slashed at Batenkaitos. Gluttony bent backward to neatly

dodge, holding up the same hand that had touched the man.

"Bleh."

Then he licked the palm of his hand with his wiry tongue—and partway through, a strange feeling filled Otto's head.

What happened? There's no mistaking that something just happened, but what exactly?

The only thing that was clear was what had caused it.

"…Who is that lying at your feet, Dynas?"

Recovering from his missed swing, Dynas looked down unsteadily at his feet. His eyes were filled with shock and confusion.

A person had collapsed there wearing the same white cloak as Dynas, so he had to be a member of the White Dragon's Scale, but he couldn't remember him at all.

"How sad, how tragic, how wretched beyond belief! This is why we can't stop indulging in one-sided reunions like this!"

"Dynas! Who is he?!"

"I don't know! I've never seen him before! At least I…don't…I think…!" Dynas trembled with fury at Batenkaitos's shrill laughter. "What did you do?! What the hell have you done?!"

"No need to be so distant, Dynas. We're old friends, aren't we? We were just one step away from cleaning up our homeland, weren't we? It hurts when you act like a stranger."

"—Ngh?! You, where did you hear that?!"

Otto didn't understand the significance of what Batenkaitos was saying, but it transformed the expression on Dynas's face. One look was all he needed to know that something precious to Dynas had just been trampled in the mud. Dynas's white blade flashed as he made to silence the villain, but Gluttony easily deflected that determined strike and chuckled gloatingly.

"Where did I hear that? What a strange thing to say considering our relationship, Dynas. We know just how hard the going got. It wasn't your fault that Miriam and Mary couldn't be saved. That was just bad luck."

"Shut up, shut up, shut up! You don't know anything about me, you damned monster!"

Dynas's sword strokes grew sharper as he erupted in rage. But Batenkaitos evaded easily, as if he knew his moves well— No, it was as if he had known them for years.

At that point, Otto had no choice but to acknowledge it. There was no more room for doubt.

“This is the Authority of Gluttony, which consumes people’s names!”

The inexplicable impression Gaston had of Batenkaitos was accurate.

The techniques born of a lifetime of training and experience that Batenkaitos had acquired had come from eating the memories of others, all to increase the contents of his repertoire.

And that was not the end of the damage caused by Gluttony’s Authority.

“That man’s name was eaten just now, right before our very eyes… And yet we can’t remember it no matter how hard we try.”

—He recalled the girl Rem, who had disappeared from everyone’s memories save Subaru’s. That same phenomenon was playing out here. It was almost certain that the collapsed person on the ground was a victim of Batenkaitos.

That was why any memories of him had disappeared from Otto’s brain. He couldn’t remember when that man had shown up or who he was—or even if he had been a close friend.

“

it's not our place to comment."

"—?"

Batenkaitos stared at Otto with a dark intensity in his eyes as he spoke that seemingly significant comment. Feeling an inexplicable emotion in that gaze, Otto furrowed his brow suspiciously.

"What…? Wait…is it?"

Despite acting like he was in a good mood, Batenkaitos was letting his dark obsession with Otto show. Trying to read into his state of mind, Otto reached another revelation—

"Everyone, I have a request. From now on, please do not call me by name."

"

absurd exchange.

Gluttony interlocked his fingers in front of his face and cracked his knuckles loudly.

“Dynas and Gaston. Not bad, but not really fit to be the main courses, either. Felty-Felt got away, so if I miss out on him, too… that’s a little too much.”

“You could always call it a day for now and dine at the next opportunity? We could always designate a time and place for a later meeting… What if I bring Sir Reinhard with me as well?”

“Calling it quits in anticipation of a later feast isn’t really an option. We don’t have the self-control to just turn back after some appetizers. Not after all this work. Louis would never let us hear the end of it.”

“I’m not very happy about hearing another name I don’t know…”

Given how outrageous Batenkaitos was as an enemy, if there was someone he himself was afraid of…

Setting aside that morsel of information in a corner of his mind, Otto glanced around. Gaston and the White Dragon’s Scale held their weapons at the ready and nodded back.

“If he touches you, he can eat you. Assume it’s over if he lays a hand on you.”

“…Not much point in hardening my defenses, then.”

“It’s the same as a sword reaching the neck or heart. Either way, we just have to finish him first.”

“Th-that’s true, but…”

Gaston was overwhelmed by Dynas’s grim determination. Wrath’s Authority probably played some part in it, but Batenkaitos had also cut deeply and touched a sore spot.

There was no guarantee that being more fired up to fight would actually be helpful. But Otto kept his mouth shut, unsure if he should point that out. It was like Felt had said earlier: Everyone had the right to risk their lives for something precious to them.

“Then it’s up to me to just find a way to navigate these straits as best as possible. Like a true merchant.”

Reigniting his will, which had threatened to wither, Otto took a deep breath and faced forward. Seeing the change in his expression, Batenkaitos gave a polite bow.

“Thank you for waiting so patiently. Such good manners.”

“It’s only natural for a gourmet to wait for preparations to be

properly completed. We're not like Roy, who eats whatever he can get his hands on. Being discerning about food brings a richness to life."

As Otto heard the most useless exposition of his life, his eyes grew noticeably colder. Seemingly oddly intrigued by that, Batenkaitos guffawed.

"So cold— Well then, thank you for the food!"

With that, Batenkaitos's small frame shot forward like an arrow. It was a serious movement incomparable with what he had been doing while setting the table. For Otto, who was supposed to be a noncombatant, a clash began to unfold at a level he could not hope to intervene in.

"Zuaaaaaa!"

Surging forward to meet him, the White Dragon's Scale practically threw themselves at the Archbishop, hoping the press of bodies and numbers would carry the day. Dynas's two sweeping blades were blocked by Batenkaitos, and while he was stopped, the rest of the soldiers charged him in a pincer attack. Batenkaitos spread his legs and dodged all the incoming attacks before unleashing a sweeping kick to knock them down just as Gaston's open-palm strike arrived.

"Heh!"

Right in the middle of the kick, Batenkaitos stopped and leaped into the air, letting Gaston's attack pass under his legs, but the shock wave sent him flying farther back.

"Look at you! Even if you make an opening…"

There was no one to take advantage of it. The White Dragon's Scale had stopped him in his tracks, but there was no follow-up to Gaston's fierce attack—

"—Urrrryaaaaaa!"

"Huh?"

All of a sudden, Otto raised a great cry while leaping at Batenkaitos.

He was stunned by the unexpected attack, and Otto took advantage of it to grab onto his small body. The next instant, Otto was hit by a knee and was forced to let go of Batenkaitos a second after grabbing hold of him.

To top it off, the knee was followed by an elbow to the side of the head, and Otto was sent down to the ground with blood spurting from his nose.

“Geha!”

“Gotta use the right tool for the right job! Just like stronger and weaker flavors should be eaten in the proper order when dining, you should know there’s an order to food being brought to the table, mister! If you just ignore that…”

“What, does it upset the balance? I can’t say I particularly care for your culinary opinions…gh.”

Interrupting the pointless explanation, Otto grinned as he endured the pain. Batenkaitos looked suspicious at that smile when Otto pointed to the boy’s waist.

Looking down slowly, he saw a glowing crystal at his waist, where Otto had grappled him.

“Wow, not bad.”

Just as he let out that murmured awe, the crystal exploded. Red and yellow light swelled as the small Archbishop was swallowed up in a fiery explosion.

“—Ngh!”

The blast launched Otto backward. It was Gaston who had withstood the explosion with his back and caught Otto’s tumbling body.

The improvised bomb was one of the trump cards that Otto had prepared, sewn into his clothes in preparation for if something happened.

Ever since the fight with Garfiel a year ago in the Sanctuary, he had made sure to always have some sort of option like that prepared at all times. It would be best if they were never needed, but this was just the sort of occasion for it.

“That should have caught him off guard, but…”

It was small, but it was an explosion of the purest crystal he had. Even if Batenkaitos survived, it should have been powerful enough to at least blow off an arm or leg. It would be best if it took his life, but—

“Ahhh, that’s so cruel. Our nice clothes are all a mess now.”

Stepping out of the center of the blast zone, waving away the charred black smoke, the barefoot desecrater appeared.

It was difficult to believe he was still fine after enduring that explosion at such close range. Looking more closely, there were several indications of the effects of the explosion on Batenkaitos as he emerged from the smoke.

However, it was limited to the ratty cloak he had been wearing

as his body was more or less untouched.

"He used those rags to minimize the blast's effects…"

"That's absurd…"

Dynas, who had seen the moment of explosion from up close, murmured as Otto muttered in shock. But he was just as quickly dumbfounded as Batenkaitos emerged bare-skinned from the black smoke.

"That's a harsh reaction after going out of your way to pull off a child's clothes. Isn't this the sort of thing adults like?"

"I don't know about the adults you grew up around, but normally, they hate it."

"Ehh, really? What then, are you going to start feeling sympathy again? So tasteless," Batenkaitos snapped back unpleasantly.

There was a hideous number of scars all over Batenkaitos's body. The marks of whips and burns and other signs of torture. Cuts, bite marks from animals, bluish-black scars of being beaten mercilessly. The signs of any and all types of violence had been carved deep into his body.

"If those wounds are what drove you to your violence…"

Otto would not sympathize. But he could at least understand that.

Considering what Batenkaitos had done, he was a wretch who deserved no pity. But even he couldn't have been born a crazed cultist.

At the very least, seeing those scars was—

"Spare yourself such boring fantasies. It just leads to pointless regrets."

Suddenly, a new voice echoed on Canal Street.

Looking up reflexively, Otto saw a shadow descend from the building above. It was an adorable girl whose dress hem fluttered and whose long hair swayed in the air.

She sighed with an untroubled face as she looked at Otto.

"Subaru is quite sufficient. We do not need yet another person with determination but terrible follow-through. Ordinarily, Subaru would be the only one who Betty helps…but this time can be a special exception, I suppose."

“Of course. Apologies for the trouble. And thank you very much.”

Otto felt such relief at hearing her scolding that he almost wanted to collapse on the spot.

He had been so sure he would never be lucky enough to have a friend come rushing to the rescue.

“Now, it’s time to finish off this whelp nice and quick. Then Subaru can carry me again.”

With a bored look on her face, the girl, or rather, the Great Spirit Beatrice joined the fray.

3

“Still though, what a meager lineup. It’s so pathetic, I almost want to cry. Subaru isn’t even here. I must have drawn quite the short end of the stick.”

“I really don’t have anything I can say to that, but…”

Having descended onto Canal Street, Beatrice did not even try to hide her disappointment at the group that met her.

No one there could deny it. They were a ragtag band of noncombatants and reserves who were not the main fighting force of any group or else were already wounded. But a small bud of hope sprouted in Otto’s heart at having Beatrice there.

“Thank you ever so much for coming here. I had heard that you were having trouble waking up due to lack of mana…”

“Regarding that, I owe a debt to a troublesome fellow now. But I suppose that discussion should be left for later.”

“Yes, that’s right I guess, Bea—”

Otto caught himself before he finished saying her name. In his relief, he had almost let it slip. He very nearly handed Batenkaitos another prey on a silver platter. He managed to stop himself, though, but his consideration ended up being a waste.

“—What are you doing outside, Lady Beatrice?”

Batenkaitos cocked his head as if amazed while addressing Beatrice by name as if it was natural.

“You were so insistent on never leaving the archive. The only times you left were for meals and when you were with the Great Spirit… Ah, wait, there was an exception, wasn’t there?”

It was a manner of speech a little too distant to be called intimate, but it still sounded to Otto like there was some level of

connection and closeness implicit in it.

"—I see. So it's that sort of trick, I suppose?"

"……"

Hearing that one statement from Beatrice, Otto gulped.

It was the first time he had ever seen such intense emotion on Beatrice's face. Otto could not imagine her ever letting such extreme anger show.

Ignoring Otto's shock, Beatrice glared at Batenkaitos.

"Just how many people do you have amassed inside you?"

"Who knows? But we're better than that Garbage Roy at least. We carefully choose our meals, but Roy has whatever's on hand, so that's a whole other level. On that point, we believe that the quality of food is the most important, so we don't get along too well with him."

Batenkaitos was referring to the other Archbishop of Gluttony whom he had hinted at throughout the fight. The one he denoted as Garbage, while he referred to himself as Gourmet based on his own aesthetic sensitivities that were incomprehensible to anyone else.

But Otto's lack of understanding was rooted in the same thing as Beatrice's own response. The intense, deep rage in her eyes was no simple loathing. It was a more base, fundamental, and visceral emotion.

Going over their conversation to try to figure out what the source of their reactions was, he realized it.

"…No…"

Batenkaitos knew Beatrice's name. Something similar had happened during the fighting with Dynas's White Dragon's Scale. Batenkaitos referenced memories he had no way of knowing without being an old comrade in order to mock them.

"

enough to recognize his fragile strength and his weak courage for what they were.

There was only one kind of person who could obtain that with any chance of certainty…

“A servant of Marquis Roswaal L Mathers—” Otto’s eyes widened as Batenkaitos spoke with a gentle, composed tone of voice. An atrocious grin on his face, the Archbishop performed an elegant curtsy with the tattered robe he had donned again. And then he looked up with frighteningly perfect poise. “Rem, at present, the helper of our one and only Subaru Natsuki, our most beloved who will someday become a hero. Wasn’t that it?”

“

It was then that Dynas, who had been watching silently, finally broke in. Looking down at Beatrice in her dress, he narrowed his eyes at an outfit that was far removed from any sort of combat attire.

"You're the Moppet Mage's contracted spirit. Can we rely on you even without your contractor?"

"Subaru was always just Betty's tagalong when it came to fighting. His job was just to carry me."

"That's a rather odd sounding job, but…"

It was a fairly demeaning evaluation, but there was deep affection hidden in her words. Dynas seemed to have noticed that as well, and after briefly looking a bit embarrassed, he nodded.

"Understood, we'll cooperate. Like before, we'll follow your orders, Adviser—"

"You had better be quick, then—Betty is not waiting."

"What?"

Dynas raised his brow at Beatrice's calm response. Beatrice pointed over at Batenkaitos. When everyone looked over at him, they all froze.

—The air around Batenkaitos was suddenly filled with countless gleaming purple crystals.

"Oh? So merciless, Lady Beatrice."

"I don't suppose there is any mercy or restraint left anywhere in the world for the likes of you."

This was El Minya; one of the few offensive dark spells was baring its fangs.

Just after Batenkaitos cackled, the purple gleams danced wildly, crashing straight toward the small figure from all angles. The big plaza was overwhelmed by glittering destruction as countless purple arrows targeted the slender frame standing there.

"With that much power, then even…"

"No…"

Otto shuddered at the power of Beatrice's preemptive attack as the purple missiles flew, but Dynas cut him off. There was a crack in his mask of determination.

"Here it com— Ngh!"

Interrupting Dynas's warning shout, the small figure dashed forward like an arrow. Breaking through the purple missiles, Batenkaitos leaped toward them with both arms raised. His arms were cloaked in a furious tempest that exploded as he swung them

downward. Sensing it was strong enough to kill with a direct hit, Otto felt a chill run down his back.

"Murak."

There was a murmured cast, and then Otto felt like his legs were floating. The next moment, his body was carried away out of range of Gluttony's attack in the wake of a purple streak.

A preemptive attack merging offense and defense. Otto was speechless at the skill Beatrice displayed.

"Ha-ha! As expected of Lady Beatrice! Nice, nice, nice, great, great, great!"

"Such a noisome nuisance. How long will you be able to remain so excitable, I wonder?"

Beatrice had warped the effects of gravity to escape Batenkaitos's attack.

Seeing her from the side as she responded to Gluttony, Otto felt a reliability emanating from her that he never got while watching the same girl who was always playing around with Subaru.

With her strength, they might just be able to teach Batenkaitos a thing or two.

"—You have five shots left."

"Eh?"

Beatrice whispered in a soft voice that only Otto could hear standing right next to her. Otto's eyes widened at that unexpected statement as he stared at her.

The Great Spirit's eyes were tensed in a way that only people who knew her well would notice.

"I can only use five more big spells. We have to checkmate in five more moves, Otto."

4

The moment Beatrice used El Minya, a magic crystal inside her cloak shattered.

There were six left—for various reasons, she wanted to keep at least one for after the battle, meaning she could use five. That was her current mana situation.

—Beatrice was an artificial spirit created by the Witch Echidna.

She was far more powerful than the average spirit, but in exchange, she had several major flaws. The biggest of which was that she did not have any way of procuring mana except taking

what was provided by her contractor. In other words, unlike other spirits, she could not absorb mana from the atmosphere or from people other than her contractor.

On top of that, she had used up the last of the mana that she had stored during the first skirmish with the Witch Cult at the plaza in front of the time tower.

While it had been necessary in order to save Subaru and the large number of other wounded people, Beatrice still blamed herself for allowing such an embarrassing situation to come to pass.

The reason she was able to stand there now was because of a sort of secret trick, a taboo method.

That was—

"—Seven crystals. One has broken already, so only five more can be used."

"So they're magic crystals? Wait, you can't mean…"

Otto was speechless when she revealed what was going on.

He's a sharp one. He probably immediately guessed the source of these magic crystals that possess so much mana. And of course, he is correct.

Beatrice's crystals were what they had originally come to the Water Gate City for. They were the powerful colorless magic stones that were needed in order to revive the Great Spirit Puck.

She was forcibly extracting the mana from them, taking that inordinate amount of mana that could even cause a miracle and converting it to magic at a terrible conversion rate. It was equivalent to wasting a thousand MP on a spell that only needed ten. They were in an awful situation where each spell would shatter one crystal.

"And we have to somehow checkmate in just five more moves? That's quite the unreasonable demand. You really are Mr. Natsuki's contracted spirit, aren't you?!"

"Betty takes that as a compliment."

While Otto groaned in desperation and scratched his head, Beatrice's expression softened a bit.

Subaru was fighting hard for Emilia's sake somewhere in the city at that very moment. Beatrice could not help sighing a little at how much she had been influenced by her connection with him.

If she was being honest, she wanted to rush to Subaru's side as soon as possible.

Her heart was telling her that was her duty as his contracted spirit. But what stopped her was her pride in that role.

Subaru would not overestimate himself. If anything, he terribly undervalued himself. So if he had willingly left Beatrice behind, then that meant he found a way to fight that did not require her. It was vexing, but that meant she was not needed for his current battle.

So the reunion with Subaru would have to be put on hold until after everything was over and he could carry her again.

In order to achieve that, she needed to get results that would make Subaru proud.

"You're making Betty's reunion with Puckie more distant. You shall experience hell for that."

"Hell? Nice, nice! If you can show it to us, we'd love to see it! Since that's what eeeveryone we've eaten got to taste at the very end!"

Batenkaitos just stuck his tongue out teasingly at Beatrice's provocation. He could not be reasoned with and showed no sign of remorse. That was an Archbishop in a nutshell—

"Betty really does hate you lot." Beatrice held her hands out and pointed her palms at Batenkaitos. *"Al Minya!"*

"—!"

"Just kidding."

Batenkaitos froze, on guard for a spell of the highest caliber, but Beatrice just stuck her tongue out in return.

Gluttony had no reason to suspect Beatrice had a limited number of casts. By sacrificing one crystal to cast a high-level spell early, Beatrice had put Batenkaitos on guard.

"Uoooooh!"

Acting in concert with her bluff, the big guy and one of the white cloaks launched a surprise attack from the left and right.

Two swords and open palms. The sharp, heavy pincer attack caught Batenkaitos unawares. But Gluttony evaded with his superhuman reflexes, launching a counter with his short swords aimed at both of their necks.

"Watch ou— Gh!"

"Sorry!"

The large man stretched his arms, intercepting both the attack aimed at him and the one aimed at the white cloak with his body. There was a hard sound as his body reduced the force of the

swords, but the next moment, the big man crouched down, coughing up blood.

"Gaston!"

Otto's eyes widened, but next to him, Beatrice grasped what had happened to Gaston.

—It was the limit of mana flow, a fighting technique that cycled the magical energy inside the user's body.

Manipulating the flow of mana was a discipline that used mana in a very different way. Unlike magic, no natural talent was required in order to use it. It needed only terribly intense training.

From the look of things, Gaston's natural abilities were well within the realm of the average person. Because of that, she could tell in an instant that he had worked hard to obtain his ability. What allowed him to stand on the same field and fight there was an accumulation of time spent training that would leave anyone coughing up blood.

"But that's the limit!"

"You tried reeeeeeeally hard, Gaston! You deserve a prize for spirit alone!"

Beatrice's voice and Batenkaitos's ridicule overlapped. The next instant, Gluttony bashed Gaston in the head with a knee, breaking his nose and toppling him over.

"You did your best, but your best just wasn't enough! The perfect prize for someone like you!"

"—Bastard!"

Gaston's temper flared at Batenkaitos's scorn while the rest of the White Dragon's Scale slipped in with flashing blades all at once. But Gluttony evaded them all with expert footwork and stretched out his hand in the opening that was created.

"Bennett Mossa, August Valen, Carsiff Finrell."

Rattling off more names, Batenkaitos slipped through the attacks and touched the soldiers' shoulders or legs. And then opening his mouth wide, Gluttony licked his palm with delight.

As that happened, three men in white cloaks whom Beatrice did not know collapsed behind Batenkaitos— Who were they, and what had happened to them?

"Beatrice! The people who just collapsed are our comrades, but we don't know their names! That's all that matters for now!"

Realizing the situation, Otto quickly shouted, pulling Beatrice back to reality. It was the effect of Gluttony's power—the ability to

steal other people's names. Confirming that, Beatrice brushed aside the storm of other unnecessary thoughts and held her palm forward.

"Another diversion…"

"If you really think so, then please disappear in a beautiful explosion!"

As Batenkaitos pointed his blades at the three people she did not know, Beatrice unleashed a powerful spell. Absorbing the power of the crystal, a purple gleam formed a circle around Gluttony.

"Tch!"

Seeing the ring of light, Batenkaitos stopped the attack and spun, his eyes piercing Beatrice, trying to stop her from activating the spell.

"—Ngh."

The next instant, Batenkaitos's focus was drawn behind him by loud footsteps. Swinging his blades behind him to cut down whoever was foolish enough to break in, he only sliced through the air because there was nobody there.

"Garfiel, the Bowel Hunter, and now you—it's quite the effective trick!"

Using Wind magic to project the sound of footsteps behind Batenkaitos, Otto and one of the white cloaks whose name had not been eaten used the opening to grab the three people who had collapsed and pulled back.

But Beatrice did not give Batenkaitos a chance to chase after them.

"—Ul Minya."

The atmosphere itself seemed to groan as an enormous purple gleam filled the sky over the plaza. Looking up at it, Batenkaitos exhaled with excitement.

"Such a lavish feast! As expected of Lady Beatrice! Are you copying Lord Roswaal?"

"That's a rather vulgar way of putting it!"

A purple disc blocked out the sky and began hurtling toward Batenkaitos.

It was a light of destruction with the mass to back it up. The tremendous force of its impact flipped up the stone pavement, creating an enormous dust cloud that filled the whole plaza and made Beatrice's dress flutter wildly.

"Did that do it?!"

Buffeted by the wind of the explosion, Otto ducked down and

shouted exultantly.

In that moment, Beatrice realized it had failed. Subaru had mentioned something about celebrating too early always being a sign of a failed plan.

“Bah-ha!”

One beat later, Batenkaitos erupted from the glimmering cloud of dust, heading straight toward Beatrice. In a dangerous spot, she leaped into the air. She inhaled as she looked down at him.

With a stance like a bird of prey, Batenkaitos stretched his fingertips out toward Beatrice. Just before they could reach, while they were both in the air where neither could escape, Beatrice cast another spell.

The dark spell that she had used more in the past year than in the previous four hundred years of her life—

“—Shamak!”

“Mgh?!”

Breaking the third crystal in her cloak, a black mist completely enveloped Batenkaitos’s body.

While he was swallowed up in an impenetrable darkness, she stole away a moment’s reprieve. Shamak’s effect would not last long, but while it did, she exchanged glances with Otto—and he nodded.

“Ahh! Look at you, Lady Beatrice! That’s almost like his way of fighting… It’s not like you at all! Has he been influencing you?!”

Brushing aside Shamak’s effects after exactly two seconds, Batenkaitos roared with ferocious laughter.

The memories of the girl inside him would’ve found Beatrice standing at Subaru’s side an unfamiliar sight. So even if Gluttony saw Subaru’s influence in Beatrice’s fighting style, he had no way of knowing just how significant it really was.

Unlike before, Beatrice knew how to depend on other people now.

“This is the power of teamwork!”

“

“—I didn’t keep you idiots waiting, did I?!”

An energetic voice called out from overhead, and suddenly, Batenkaitos froze. What descended before him was a blond girl who had raced along the rooftops on the shortest path possible—

“Wha…? Gh.”

“Have a taste of somethin’ that’d make even Reinhard cry!”

Felt swung the pole-shaped object in her arms with a triumphant grin. Wrapped in a white cloth, it whistled through the air and slammed into Batenkaitos’ head.

“

name would reside in the villain's stomach.

That instant, all traces of the girl named Felt would disappear from everyone's memories—

"—Oh, bgh."

Just before the hideous banquet reached its uninterrupted conclusion, Gluttony's expression changed dramatically.

The expression of pleasure of a first-rate life dancing over his tongue, the anticipation of that ultimate of delicacies that had set his eyes afire, suddenly turned. Batenkaitos shuddered, feeling sick, as if he had swallowed a terrible, bitter medicine.

It was not an act. There was no point in doing something like that.

It was just a simple fact that something had gone wrong when he attempted to eat Felt's name.

And in that moment grew an opportunity—

"—Get ready!"

Beatrice landed next to Felt, who leaped to her feet. Beatrice's small hands were grasping the long, spear-like pole that Felt had brought.

The statement that it was a weapon that would work even on Reinhard was not wrong. But Felt had been using it incorrectly. Beatrice could tell because she knew the weapon.

"—Ngh."

Batenkaitos's hand still on her face, Felt gritted her teeth and adjusted how she was holding the metia. Pointing the tip, which was still wrapped in cloth, at Batenkaitos, she lowered her hips.

The next instant, Beatrice cracked two more crystals in her cloak and poured an absurd amount of mana into the metia.

Sensing the destructive force, Batenkaitos twisted his expression as he stepped backward. Unable to escape the shock of the bitter pill, he was just reacting on instinct to avoid a dangerous attack.

"Wah…"

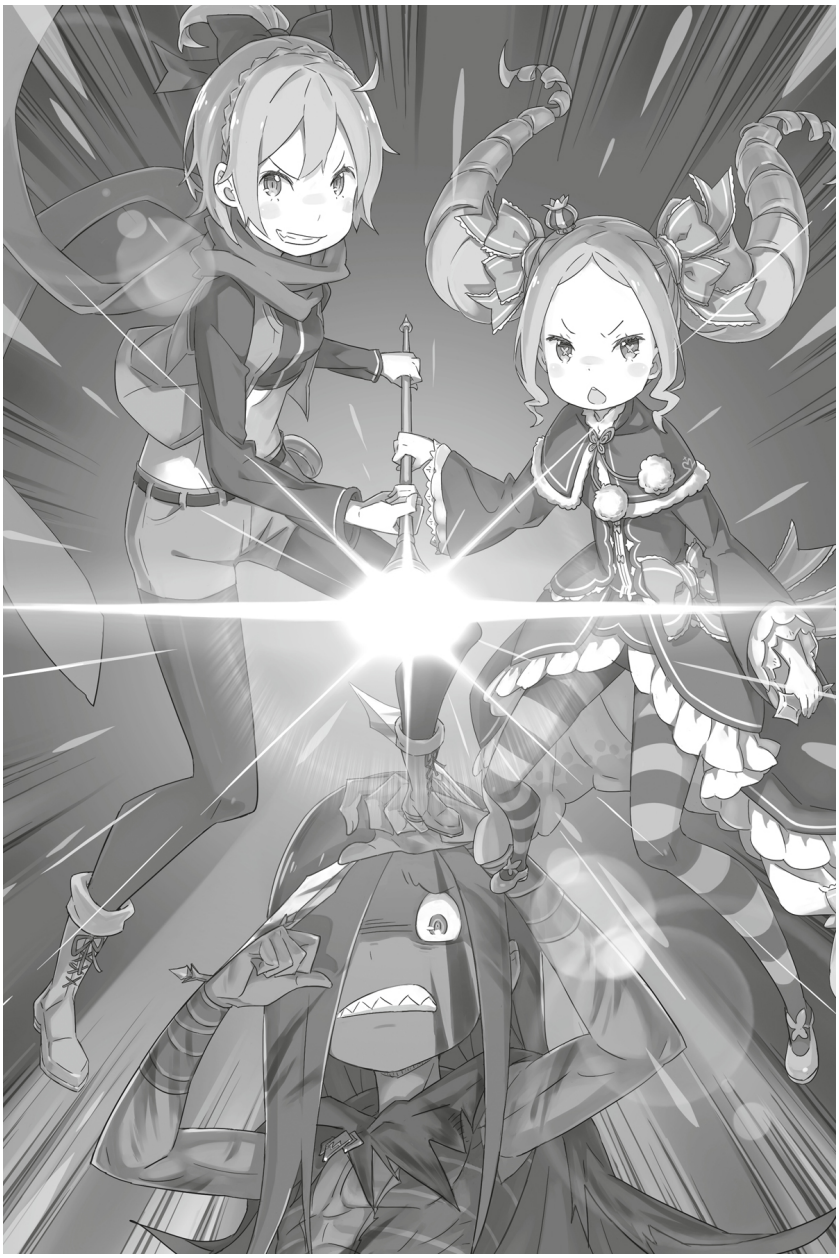
But then his leg caught, and he lost his balance. In shock, Gluttony looked down to see an arm that had a solid lock on his slender ankle.

It was Gaston, who had crawled over despite the alarming amount of blood flowing from his nose.

Seeing her follower's stubbornness, Felt laughed and then grinned triumphantly.

"—Eat shit!"

—Unable to escape, Gluttony was blown away by the white light that the metia unleashed from close range.



5

A hot gust of air blew past, making Beatrice's hair dance wildly behind her. Her neat hair grew disheveled, but Beatrice's attention was elsewhere.

Her eyes were focused on the metia in her hands.

"

was not dead yet, he would be before long.

"Beatrice! Lady Felt!"

Waving his hand, Otto ran over to the two of them. His cap had been blown off in the blast wave of the metia's attack, and he was a mess all over, but his expression was bright and sunny.

"Are you safe? I'm not sure how to describe it, but that was amazing…or rather, appalling."

"Why did you correct yourself? Then again, can't say I disagree. What the hell is this staff…?"

Otto and Felt looked nervously at the metia in her hands. It was a magic staff that had unleashed an awesome power, but that was only natural.

"This staff was created by Mo…by a great and wise and beautiful mage long ago to annoy a certain dragon. It was lost to time, but perhaps this is some sort of destiny."

"Heh, you sure know your stuff, shorty. A staff for bullying a dragon, huh?"

There was an air of admiration in her voice as Otto's face tensed, because he was one of the few people who knew that the mother whom Beatrice was referring to was in fact a witch who had disappeared from history.

"Incidentally, did it actually work on the dragon?"

"From what Betty heard, the dragon was on the verge of tears."

Though, the one who told Beatrice that was the first-generation Roswaal. Back then, he teased Beatrice in all sorts of ways, so it was possible that report was just another of his pranks.

That it was an absurd weapon created with the express purpose of tormenting the dragon Volcanica…

"No point sweatin' the small stuff. Important thing's it blew that annoying prick away. That was all thanks to you knowin' how to use this, though, so thanks, shrimp!"

Breaking in, Felt flashed a grin as she clapped Beatrice on the back. Grimacing at the intensity of it, Beatrice puffed her cheeks out.

"…Shrimp, shrimp, shrimp. You are quite small yourself. A shrimp has no business calling someone else a shrimp."

"You wha? A brat who gets pissy even when they're bein' complimented, huh? Let me tell you, I've grown quite a bit this past year—both my height and my chest. And I'm only gonna get bigger and bigger than you goin' forward."

“Unfortunately for you, Betty was born with this charming design—”

“Ladies, ladies, please calm down!” Interrupting their argument, Otto intervened with his best salesman’s smile. “May I?” Looking from one to the other, he continued, “We won thanks to everyone working together. Let’s celebrate that. Our plan panned out and resulted in a splendid victory! That is the true thrill of battle… Huh?”

“—? What is it?”

“No, just, why am I this happy about winning a fight…? When did I start being the kind of person to talk about the true thrill of battle…?”

“Whoa, here comes the midlife crisis. I ain’t dealin’ with that crap. Hey, wake up, Gaston.”

Ignoring Otto’s distress, Felt shook Gaston’s shoulder from where he lay on the ground. It looked like she was showing her appreciation for someone who had worked hard, but Gaston was totally unconscious. Not that that could be helped, though.

There was no guarantee they would have been able to land that last attack without Gaston’s stubborn determination at the last moment.

“Otto is correct. It was a victory that was won by everyone, I suppose.”

“Eh? Did you say something just now?”

“I said you are a natural wartime adviser.”

“I’m scared that I’m not going to be able to really deny that anymore at the rate things are going!”

Beatrice crossed her arms, a trace of a sigh in her voice as Otto shrieked in disbelief.

However, it was precisely because of his unique character that made him so crucial to Emilia’s faction. But taking a page out of her contractor Subaru’s book, though, she would never say that out loud.

“Sorry to interrupt the pleasantries, but I’m going to tie him up. Any objections?”

Looking back at them, the man in the white cloak gestured toward Batenkaitos with his chin. Looking closely, Beatrice recognized his face. She had met him at Muse Company. Dynas or something like that.

He was the only one of the men in white cloaks still standing on

his own two feet.

Otto peered over at Batenkaitos in response.

“Tie him up? Is he even still alive?”

“It would be a problem if he was dead. He might know where the young master is, and he might be useful for negotiating with the cultists—though I’d honestly like to just finish him off for good.”

There was a dangerous edge to Dynas’s strained voice that he could not hide entirely.

Naturally because of the comrades he had lost, but the strongest reason for it was an instinctive loathing and hostility. Being an Archbishop was more than enough justification to kill him.

The fact of that was something that pained Beatrice’s heart just a bit, though—

“But these Archbishops aren’t all they’re cracked up to be if a ragtag group like us can blow them away. Why does everyone run away from them?”

“It is just because he let his guard down. He was obsessed with eating our names. And more specifically, because he wanted to taste them while we were still alive. That was why he didn’t kill us.”

“So he lost ’cause he held back thinkin’ we couldn’t touch him? Talk about lame.”

Beatrice was in agreement with Otto’s analysis. If Batenkaitos had actually devoted the skills and techniques of all the memories he possessed to the task of killing them, they would have had no chance. But those sorts of musings were irrelevant in a real fight. They had won, and nothing would change that—

“—Huh?”

As she was thinking that, Beatrice turned her gaze to an unexpected sound.

It had come from Dynas, who was trying to tie up the Archbishop while he was on the verge of death. Blood erupted from all over Dynas’s body as he let out a raspy voice and then collapsed to his knees.

“

Something struck her shoulder, and then she fell to the pavement. It hurt, and she was shocked, but she ignored that and stared at Otto, who had pushed her aside.

Right after pushing her away, Otto had frozen up, unable to move. He was looking down—looking at his legs.

“

like to ask you."

Felt had tensed, on guard as the large man responded in a light tone that did not match his appearance. Felt looked overwhelmed by that riposte as the man laughed pleasantly.

"Thinking to use an alias against us. So smart. And how pathetic of Brother to have the tables turned because of that."

"'Alias'…? What are you talking about?"

"The plan you and that carved-up man there came up with, Felty-Felt. Uh-huh, uh-huh. Amazing. It's moving in fact— No matter whose memories we check, there isn't anything like it."

The man did not answer Felt's question. He was immersed in his own little world and rejecting hers.

It did not mesh. The way he looked and sounded, his answers and presence—they were all at odds.

A deep, raspy man's voice speaking in the singsong lilt that would've suited a little girl. The way his body swayed and the way he clapped with a flair—none of it fit.

And as Beatrice and Felt were speechless at the mismatch—

"…Are…you Gluttony?"

"—Ohh? You can still talk? That's amazing. Look at you trying so hard."

The man arched his eyebrows and curled his lips upward. He fixed his joyous gaze on Otto, who was glaring at him while holding his wounded legs and breathing heavily.

"The Gluttony…who we defeated is gone… And the cloak…you are wearing… It's the same as…the one he wore…"

Otto struggled to get the words out in an admirable display of sheer determination.

Batenkaitos, who had been on the verge of death, was indeed nowhere to be found. His small figure had disappeared at some point, and this man had appeared in his place. The meaning of that was obvious.

"Nice, nice, nice, nice, nice, nice… gathering around our dinner table is worth it for you."

"—Ngh."

Pressing his palm to his face, the man could not hide his excitement as he muttered, and his figure began to change.

The man's shape shimmered and warped unnaturally, like a mirage, and the next moment, the big man who was standing there disappeared. And in his place—

“Ah-ha.”

—was a barefoot girl who looked not too much younger than Felt.

She had slender, dainty limbs, and almost-translucent blond hair that extended into a swirl on the ground. There was a natural beauty to her well-proportioned face that made even her rags seem to shine.

An adorable, angelic little girl—were it not for the malice that filled her expression.

“Archbishop of Gluttony, Louis Arneb.”

“Louis…?”

“That’s our name. You were the ones who wanted to know, weren’t you?”

Beatrice gulped as Gluttony took the form of a little girl and introduced herself by a different name.

It made no sense. The Archbishop of Gluttony’s name was supposed to be Lye Batenkaitos. So why did Gluttony have a different name and form? No, it was not just that, either. It was not simply a change in appearance; Gluttony had changed on the inside, too.

"…I sit here and listen through all that, and this bullshit is what I get?"

"Oh? Is the princess with the fake name displeased by this sort of thing?"

"And I mean that crap, too, when I say quit jerkin' us around!"

Felt's canines flashed as she yelled at the Gluttony who had introduced herself as Louis. She pointed the metia in her hand at her.

"Don't screw with me! There's nothin' fake about my name! I've lived fifteen years with the name Old Man Rom gave me, so don't go callin' it fake."

"Ahh, I see. So you never realized it wasn't your true name? Then allow us to inform you that Felt is not your name. You have a proper name that you received before the one you were given by the parent who raised you."

"You mean the name my shitty parents who abandoned me in some back alley gave me? Then I'm sure it was somethin' like *Burden* or *Nuisance* or *Trash*. That good enough for you?!"

"Now, now, no need to be that way."

Gluttony—Louis—put her finger on the metia that Felt was brandishing.

"You're acting tough, but you can't actually shoot it again, right? We've seen this before."

"Ngh…"

"No need to be so tense. We're going to pull back for today." Louis shrugged.

"Pull back…? Are you serious about that, I wonder?"

Beatrice pointed her palms toward Gluttony as she glared at the Archbishop. Looking at the two girls, who had turned their hostility toward her, Louis cackled lightly.

"Dead serious. Brother got his butt kicked, and Big Brother just does whatever she says. As for us, we don't really care about gourmet or garbage or any of that—they just don't understand."

"

make a choice.

Fight or let her leave. And their choice was—

“It’s disappointing when they’re smart—but you chose wisely.”

Laughing scornfully as neither of them moved, Louis Arneb’s figure melted into the shadows of the plaza. They couldn’t match her. That was their limit after so many members of their party had been so badly wounded.

“…Meaning they got us.”

“Damn it!”

As Beatrice’s shoulders slumped, Felt exploded at the sense of defeat and failure.

Honestly, Beatrice was in complete agreement with her. It was a result that had to be judged a defeat.

Otto had managed to impress Louis, but he was barely conscious in a fog of pain. Dynas, the other soldiers in white cloaks, and Felt’s follower, Gaston, were all down for the count as well.

They all needed healing as soon as possible. And Beatrice was the only one who could do it.

Beatrice and the crystals in her cloak.

Either way—

“Betty can’t face Puckie like this… Asking Subaru to carry Betty will have to wait, too.”

There was confirmation now that the soul of the sleeping girl resided inside the Archbishop of Gluttony—inside the prey they had let get away.

But how should that news be shared with Subaru?

“

CHAPTER 2

THE TERRITORY VICTIM

1

The girl cocked her head at the one-armed man who had snapped at her while holding a liuyedao at the ready.

She was angelically adorable and possessed a flowerlike fragile beauty. Her pale-white skin was smooth, and her dainty limbs were cute all the way down to her nails. Her blond hair gleamed like gold, and her ruby-red eyes were just radiant. The skin exposed by what little clothing she wore and her alluring gaze were entrancing, able to charm men who desired her even if they knew it was all a trap.

However—

"Kya-ha-ha-ha! That's an interesting thing to say, meat boy! 'Not before I die, but before you do'? Where'd you steal that line from?! I'm gonna keel over laughing!"

The girl who was laughing so shrilly would have been beauty manifest—were it not for the fact that half of her face was crushed and her eye was on the verge of popping out.

She was almost rolling on the floor in laughter with her face quite literally half destroyed. The wound trembled and fixed itself with a distinctive gurgling sound. The bleeding stopped, and tendons and muscle knitted themselves back together as her face healed.

That unnatural regeneration—no, the actual transformation itself was the power of the Archbishop of Lust.

"That's seriously nasty to see. I never was a fan of gory stuff. I'm the type who goes pale when I see blood. Know what I mean?"

"A guy who calls a lady disgusting within moments of meeting

her and doesn't know how to clean up the way he talks will never be popular with girls. Nice try pretending to be a comedian to make me let down my guard. And what exactly are you planning to do with that big, long thing in your hand?!"

"A lady shouldn't bust out the dirty jokes so fast. It kills the mood."

Hearing that, the girl, Capella, arched an eyebrow. Her face had been reconstructed in just a few moments, returning to its adorable visage, which was the polar opposite of her inside.

And then twisting that restored cute face, Capella cackled loudly.

"Kya-ha-ha-ha! What's that?! You sound like a total virgin! Do you have a nice empty field of flowers you're keeping in that head of yours? Kyaaa, I wanna just crush and stomp and corrupt everything about you!"

"Don't make me repeat myself. I'm in a bad mood today. Honestly, I don't really feel like doin' this right now."

The man in the iron helm, Al, spat in response to Capella's abrasive attitude.

Capella's eyes narrowed as Al refused to go along with her provocations and continued to act as if he really did not want to be there. His stance was far different from the group who had caught her in a trap and sent her tumbling from upstairs.

"What, *I don't wanna do this, but I can't back down here*? That's pretty contradictory, don't ya think? Whose fault do you think this fun little lover's spat is?"

"That's what you're calling it? Also, this and everything else is all your fault."

"Maybe the impetus was us. But is that really *everything*? Is every last bit of what's happened really our fault? You think everything that has happened in this city falls completely on our shoulders?"

Holding out her hands, Capella created a frame with her fingers, closing one eye as she looked at Al through the frame. Al was silent as he met her ruby-red gaze.

After holding his breath for a long, long while, he exhaled.

"…You tryin' to say somethin'?"

"Not at all. It's just that there's been this asshole who keeps doing the most annoying things, right? And I've been thinkin' for a long time now about who that bastard really is. That's all."

“

everything in her attempts at courtship. Not that anyone would call such an extreme and one-sided desire to steal away affection true love.

Naturally, Al's response to her wooing, which was bereft of any humanity, was to raise his sword.

"Sorry. I appreciate the thought, but we don't really know each other that well yet, and it would be embarrassing if rumors started spreading among my friends, so I'm going to have to say no."

"How cute, caring about what other people think. I don't really mind a prick who likes being abused by a woman. Nothing wrong with a little masochism."

"Huh? What are you—?"

"Outrageous lack of concern for anyone or anything around her, a harsh gaze, a voluptuous body, and that on-edge feeling like she might turn violent at any moment. Decently tall with a bold amount of skin on display, moody and loves to talk, but intelligent. That she relies on you but won't let you get too close is a particularly key point… Something like that?"

As she spoke, Capella's body transformed and warped before his eyes. Her arms and legs grew; her clothes changed into a dress that revealed her shoulders, back, and significant amounts of cleavage. Her face took on a look of bold and dauntless self-confidence, and her eyes filled with an unwavering sense of wisdom. Long blond hair fell down her back as a beautiful woman appeared.

It was not anyone connected with the city, but she resembled someone—

"Oops, not blond? That's the most common in Lugunica, but oh well. In that case, red…no, orange."

Watching the subtle changes in Al's reaction, Capella changed her hair color rapidly. Black, brown, green, and blue before reaching the red end of the spectrum, where, after close inspection, she suddenly shifted to an orange color.

With just that, the impression she gave off grew extremely close to a woman who was familiar to Al.

"Tch, that's a disgusting impression. Where'd you get a chance to see the princess?"

"I've never seen or been aware of her before. I just guessed the sort of face and body that suits your tastes based on your reactions. It's only natural that a devoted woman would try to meet her partner's preferences, isn't it?"

“My reactions? Piss off, you can’t even see my face—”

“Voice, gestures, the pauses in your speech, your eyeline based on the angle of your neck, your attitude. Your personality, nature, and preferences that bled into our conversation.”

Capella quietly interrupted Al as he played dumb. Despite himself, Al fell silent as Capella stared at him with her transformed crimson eyes.

“I devote myself with all my being, never missing a single thing or skimping on the slightest effort. I’m going to this much effort for you, so look at me. Me and only me. Don’t look at anyone else. My face, my body, my voice, my gestures—every last bit should be exactly what you like!”

Capella raised her voice, and as she was talking, she grew closer and closer to Priscilla. Her demand was refreshingly straightforward, but it was a little too frank and on the nose.

“…Sorry, but people aren’t ready for that kind of love yet.”

“Don’t be like that. Tell me, what is it about me that you don’t like?”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I don’t love or hate you. I just don’t care… Sorry, that was a lie. You’re disgusting, so yeah, I hate you. It hurts to even look at you.”

“—Ngh! You unfaithful, rotten garbage!”

Capella stamped her foot as her right arm transformed from the shoulder down into a giant wolf’s head.

The beast howled ferociously as it closed in at high speed while Al simply stood still. The line of bladelike teeth was moments away from biting down on his upper torso—but just before they closed, he leaped to the side, neatly avoiding it.

“Don’t think that’s enough to get away!”

“I don’t! After the side! I gotta go backward!”

This time, a giant snake’s body slammed down toward him as he rolled. It was an attack from a blind spot that Al avoided by leaping backward, and right after landing, he caught the wolf’s fangs with his saber’s blade.

“Oh, oooooh, *Dona*!”

Losing to the strength of the beast’s charge, Al cast a spell just before the impact knocked him back. A wall of earth rose from the broken floor of the basement, crushing Capella’s arm that had transformed into a wolf against the ceiling.

As cracks spidered across the wolf’s skull, buckets of blood

erupted from it. Unsurprisingly, Capella, who had been connected to the wolf, stumbled as well. Al exploited this with a ferocious lunge.

"Grr, yaaaaaaaa!"

His slash sliced completely through her neck.

Her face, which so closely resembled Priscilla's, flew through the air, and a split second later, blood spurted from the stump. Based on what happened to Crusch after being covered in Capella's blood, there was no need to question how dangerous it might be to let any of that gore touch him.

He would have to get away from the body to avoid the spray, but—

"Don't play me for a fool, you fraud!"

—Al did not hesitate to step straight into the shower of blood, skewering Capella through the back with his blade.

Carving the heart out of her body while it was on the verge of collapsing after losing its head, he brutally added a second lethal wound to the first. But that was not enough for him.

"Time for a nasty little fireworks show! *El Dona!*"

Kicking her body forward, Al aggressively unleashed another spell, using the tip of his liuyedao to direct magic inside Capella and detonate the defenseless woman's body.

There was a comical *whump* that almost sounded like a fart as Capella was blown to pieces. Her limbs were blown away as pink organs and bright-red blood splattered the walls of the basement.

In the cool air, the remaining chunks of flesh gave off steam as the most gruesome show in the Water Gate City finally came to a close.

"*Haah*, *haah*, how's that?! That oughtta be enough…"

Shoulders heaving, Al triumphantly declared victory over the lurid remains. It went without saying, but no earthly creature could survive being that badly broken. Al's declaration echoed hollowly without anyone to answer it—

"—Isn't that a bit harsh? You didn't have to go that far."

"Fuck."

Hearing that voice, Al readied his sword again.

His sword was pointed not at the bloody remnants of a corpse, but at the head that he had sent flying earlier—the face that resembled Priscilla's lying on the floor. The face that seemed to be savoring Al's reaction as it lay on its cheek.

“Beheading, gouging out your heart, and painting the room with your insides wasn’t enough? You’ve gotta be cheating…”

“That’s just me, still alive after being beheaded and having my heart stabbed and having my body smeared across the entire room, though it’s rare for someone to be that merciless. I should have looked pretty much exactly like your dream girl, right? What, is hurting people an expression of love for you? One of your kinks?”

As Al sighed at the failed plan, Capella’s head began to rise.

The severed neck began to wriggle, almost like a signal for the black flesh that poured out of it. That became a platform for her head, creating a torso and then limbs, and then the twisting flesh transformed into pale skin and her original figure—Capella’s body was fully restored.

“…What about the rest of that mess?”

“Don’t need it, so I’ll just melt it down.”

Capella cocked her head as the remnants of her other body melted away with a *hiss*. The organs and flesh and everything else turned to black sludge, leaving behind only a rotten stench as they disappeared.

Al was aggravated by how it seemed like she made it all disappear mainly to annoy him.

“Still though, you didn’t even hesitate to cut my head off. You’ve got a friend who’s in a pretty bad place ’cause of my blood; weren’t you scared of the same thing happening to you?”

“Don’t try to bluff me. I don’t know what the requirements are, but I already know it’s not just some crazy poison that activates from simple contact. I missed out once before tryin’ to dodge all that.”

“—? I don’t recall seeing you try to dodge anything, though.”

“Talkin’ about a time you wouldn’t know about. Anyway, looks like the neck and heart aren’t enough, and blowing up your body didn’t work, either. Guess I gotta try crushing the head after I cut it off? …Seriously, I wasn’t kidding about not loving these sorts of gorefests.”

Al let out a heavy, exhausted sigh. That was both from having experienced just how dangerous Capella was, but it also seemed to be an exhaustion caused by something else, too.

Meanwhile, now that her regeneration was complete, there was no indication that Capella was affected in any way by how scrupulously he had killed her. In addition to changing appearance

and more extreme transformations, she had a regenerative power that neared immortality—the Archbishop of Lust was still standing and still going strong.

“Aaagh, damn it…”

“Wooow, not backing off even though it’s so hard on you! How noble! I can’t get enough of that manliness! Your rating’s going through the roof in my books! Kya-ha-ha!”

“

Her face had been split down the middle by his sword, but she just pushed the two halves back together, which was apparently enough to heal the wound. Red steam rose from the cut as the fast-acting regeneration ran its course and she completely recovered.

That should have been the twentieth lethal wound, but she had recovered from every last one. Chunks of Capella's corpse that had scattered around him melted away and dispersed in a black smog as a rotten stench wafted in the air.

And at the center of that miasma stood the queen of grotesqueries and corpses, wearing a twisted expression as she grinned at Al.

"Well then, how many more times before you can actually kill me, do you think?"

"Yeah, it's debatable whether I'll be able to kill you even after a hundred deaths. To be honest, I'm already pushing fifty at this point…but aren't you being a little too relaxed?"

There was a bit of scorn in Al's voice as he responded to Capella's provocation. He could practically see the question marks floating over her head, so Al pointed to the ceiling with his sword.

"We saw through the fact that you would try to catch us with our pants down. Meaning we were all ready to roll out the red carpet for you. So do you really think that I was supposed to be the trump card?"

"

did with little old me in mind, right? I could never turn down such a thoughtful gift just on principle!"

"Wait, wait, wait. Are you serious? You're really gonna die, you know? Dying hurts, and it's scary as hell. All the more so if it's your first time. You should seriously reconsider. Save your first time for a more special moment."

"You really are so thoughtful, going out of your way to include dirty jokes, too!"

Capella's eyes sparkled as she got the wrong idea from Al's inarticulate argument. She wrapped her arms around her slender body, her eyes brimming with excitement as she looked at Al.

"—But if that was just a lie to trick me, I won't forgive you."

She flashed an adorable smile that melted away in the next moment. Her body transformed into a black wall of flesh that swelled in an explosion of mass. It grew and grew, and a roar thundered through the basement as a pitch-black, scaled creature appeared.

"…Right, I forgot you could turn into a dragon."

Capella had transformed into the legendary species right before Al's eyes—becoming a black dragon spreading its wings.

Aboveground during the day and belowground after sunset, the government building was graced once again by the menace of a black dragon. It was like the building was cursed, and Al could practically feel his own luck getting worse with every passing second.

"Damn it…I'm the victim this time. I really don't have any luck."

"—Hey? Which me do you like the mooost?"

Even as a black dragon, Capella still spoke like a bubbly little girl.

Bathed in the dragon's bloody breath, Al shook his head, deciding it was about time—

"We're both the type of people that parents warn their kids about, right? So there's no way the two of us were going to work out."

With a twirl, he sheathed his sword at his back, flipping Capella off once his hand was free again.

She didn't recognize the gesture, but she could tell it was supposed to be an insult.

"You…"

“I don’t love anyone.”

A brutal light filled her golden eyes at the same time as Al’s raspy declaration.

The next instant, a spell fell from his lips—not aimed at Capella, who was on guard against him, but at the seemingly meaningless pillar in the corner of the underground, which collapsed violently as the ground beneath it heaved upward.

A tremor rocked the enormous building as it started to collapse, filling the underground space from directly above.

“—Ngh! There really was a trap.”

“Prepared with everything we’ve got, just for you. Not out of love, though—just plain old animosity.”

As Capella looked up at the avalanche crashing down on them, Al leaped through a crack in the wall toward the sound of water that could be heard coming from the other side—into the waterway flowing underground.

Naturally, the hole in the wall was not big enough for Capella to pass through after transforming into a large black dragon—

“—What do you mean? You did it just for me. This is absolutely love, isn’t it?”

The dragon’s cheeks reddened ever so slightly, and her eyes possessed a tenderness, just like a maiden in love.

But there was no one to behold that mysterious, never-before-seen sight as it was swallowed up and disappeared beneath the tons of earth and debris that came crashing down from above.

3

“—Pwah.”

Pushing off from the bottom of the waterway, he broke the surface and filled his burning lungs with air.

Fortunately, Al was a good swimmer. People were usually surprised, figuring he would have trouble, but he had lived a long time with only one arm and had found ways of dealing with the bulk of standard situations.

Slowly, using his buoyancy, he made his way to the water’s edge, grabbing it and pulling himself up.

I’m completely soaked. It would be nice to remove this helmet and get the water out, but—

“Guess I’m not makin’ the kind of face that I should be showin’

other people at the moment."

"You don't have to hold back on my account. I won't pay it no mind."

"I'm just too self-conscious. And the idea of everyone talking about my face makes me sick to the stomach."

Responding jokingly, Al tilted his head and let the water out through the bottom of the helm. Anastasia smiled wryly at his stubborn response.

"If you say so."

The girl with light-purple hair and deep-green eyes watched Al from the side as he shook his head to get the last of the water out of his helmet, but his light-yellow eyes were turned to the government building that had collapsed.

"To think it would really end up getting totally demolished. Thank goodness you were safe, though."

"It sort of feels like I was secretly crushed under it all three times, but at least you also got out okay. Oh yeah, where's that cat-eared boygirl? He didn't get caught up in it, did he?"

"…Thank you for your concern. I'm fine."

"Whoa."

Al was standing on one leg tilting his head to get the water out of his ear when the unexpected voice set him off-balance.

Looking back, he saw Ferris peeking out from an alley. Ferris's flaxen cat ears were folded down, his hair and clothes were a mess, and his face still showed signs of a recent battle.

His stubborn insistence on being the first to face Capella when she inevitably came to attack was still fresh in Al's memory. And it had worked out as intended, so he should have gotten a chance to talk to Capella, but…

"From that face, I guess you didn't get to find out what you wanted. You okay?"

"I said I'm fine… What about you? You were the one going at it with her this whole time. How are you?"

"The idea of getting free healing from a beauty is tempting, but I was lucky and cleared the fight without any injuries. Wait, does that mean I was unlucky?"

"Yes, yes, that's enough joking for now— What happened to the Archbishop, Al?"

Interrupting the tasteless joke, Anastasia probed Al as he wrung out his waistcloth.

He hadn't exactly stuck around to watch what Capella did in the last moments. But she had transformed into a giant black dragon in that cramped underground space. There shouldn't have been enough time to transform back and then escape.

"There's no mistakin' she's part of the foundation now. But…"

"But there's no point getting our hopes up that she'll die from something that simple… She was fine and dandy even after taking a shot of Lady Anastasia's magic to the face, after all."

"Magic…?"

Al was of the same opinion when it came to Capella's unnatural regenerative abilities. She could recover from having her head cut off and heart cut out and even having her entire body turned into a chunky paste, so thinking of how to kill her was absurd.

But Al reacted more to that one word than Capella's crazy abilities.

"But it looked like your attack had some sort of effect, Ferris. You were the one who withered that flower arm of hers, right? Keeping a trick like that secret isn't very nice."

"…You're one to talk about that, Lady Anastasia, since you kept claiming you can't fight."

Ferris averted his eyes as he muttered, bringing up what they had talked about before Lust had come to attack.

While preparing to ambush Capella, they had obviously confirmed each person's fighting abilities. As part of that, they had all volunteered what they would be able to do, and then after ironing out the plan, they ultimately decided on collapsing the whole building on top of Capella as their decisive move.

Of course, it was only natural that everyone would have held back a little bit on the cards they held, but—

"—What are you thinking?"

Suddenly, Anastasia spoke in a quiet voice as Ferris gulped at the sudden scene. Al's yellow eyes were opened wide and filled with enmity as he pointed his liuyedao at Anastasia.

"Wh-what are you?! What…?"

"Don't say anything. Just move behind me and get away from her."

Al gestured with his chin, which still had water slowly dripping off it.

But Ferris did not move. Al let out a *tsk*.

"If this is a joke, it ain't funny, Al. What are you on about?"

“Asking stupid questions. You hide a trump card like magic from us and that only helps the enemy…but that’s not the problem. If I pulled that argument on you, it would just boomerang back on me, too.”

“Then why are you pointing that sword at me?”

“Because you did something that Anastasia Hoshin shouldn’t have been able to do. What the hell are you scheming?”

Al’s voice dropped into a low growl as the emotion vanished from Anastasia’s face. A dangerous mood descended on the two of them that was on the verge of going off—

“Get a grip on yourselves! We just finished the battle, and you’re already doing this?!”

Ferris, who couldn’t keep up with the sudden developments, exploded first. He broke right between the two of them, pressing his flat chest up to the edge of Al’s sword.

“…Oy, oy, what are you doing? This isn’t the time for jokes.”

“What, does it look like I’m joking? Do you not understand this isn’t the time for allies to be bickering with each other?! Everyone else is still fighting!”

“

The voice had come from the road on the other side of the canal that Al had crawled out from. Squinting their eyes and looking closely, they noticed it—in the dark alleyway, there were dozens of little red points of light floating in the darkness.

They were rats small enough to fit in the palm of a hand. A perfectly normal wild rat, and any given one was no threat at all. But there were hundreds of them writhing in the dark alley.

Ferris's throat spasmed, and he let out a hoarse croak.

As he watched with quivering eyes, countless rats swarmed together, merging. The outline of the swarm warped and grew misshapen, then finally melted together entirely—

"Bumbadabum! Capella enters again, stage right!"

The swarm of rats reconstructed itself into a mass of flesh, out of which emerged the blond, red-eyed, adorable yet monstrous girl. And that girl, the Archbishop of Lust, Capella Emerada Lugunica, cocked her head.

"Huh? That's a pretty shitty reaction. Adorable and cute little old me just reappeared, so shouldn't you be crying and wetting yourselves in joy? Kya-ha-ha!"

Her shrill, hatred-inducing cackle filled the moonlit night. Seeing her standing on the other side of the waterway with nary a scratch on her, Al sighed.

"…I didn't expect that to actually kill you, but doing no damage at all hits pretty hard."

"Nah, I'd say you tried pretty hard there. Even I had to consider that I might die… Well, not really! But still, though, my breast was all aflutter!" Capella exclaimed as she put her hands to her chest. "I mean, it's only natural, since you were thinking so intensely about me, after all."

"I seriously can't deal with that sort of stalker mindset…"

Al raised his blade again while she espoused her blindly twisted sense of love.

She had appeared before them again, so naturally, she was going to settle things and attack again— Honestly, if she was there to kill them, then that would at least be better.

If she changed them like she did the other victims in the tower before, that would be the absolute worst.

"The territory is undone already, and her power is the worst possible match for me, too…"

If the coin had just landed on the other side, he would have at

least had something he could try to do, but—

"Anyway, we've got no choice but to knuckle down. I'm begging you, no holding shit back this time, okay? If you do, all three of us are gonna die or else get turned into a bunch of giant flies—"

"Hey, come on now—don't go jumping to conclusions, please. Adorable as you are in your stupidity and inability to see the whole picture and see what's happening, I'm done for today."

"…Huh?"

Holding her hand toward them as Al got ready to fight, Capella stuck her red tongue out as she gave a reply that left Al at a loss for words.

"Like. I. Said. I'm done for now. Basically, I've done everything I feel like doing. I've made a note of all you cute little bastards and your faces, too. And more importantly—"

"Your Gospel is telling you that?"

"When you put it that way, it makes it sound like I'm just doing whatever a book says, which I can't say I appreciate."

Capella glared in annoyance at Anastasia's interruption. And then she raised her left arm, and its upper half started to visibly bulge. Slowly, a book, her Gospel, appeared out of the swelling flesh.

"…That's a pretty convenient storage space."

"You like it? If we had a cute little baby, it might just have the same sort of ability. Ah, but no, that would never work out. Your love belongs to me and me alone. I might die of jealousy if you loved anyone other than me."

As she continued spouting more meaningless nothings, she played with the Gospel in her hand before rubbing the black tome against her cheek.

"This book is just a tool for making decisions. I still have the freedom to choose my course. So my feelings for you darling assholes are the real thing. Don't misunderstand me. This is pure love."

"Ngh! What pure love…? Who would believe a single word out of your mouth?!"

Ferris gritted his teeth, and his face reddened at Capella's provocative attitude. Anastasia grabbed his shoulder before the menacing look on his face could go any further and he leaped over the water.

“I understand the feeling, but stay calm. If you let her provoke you…”

“The sooner…the sooner I kill that thing, the sooner Lady Crusch’s body can be…”

“Are you stupid? Don’t mistake fantasy for hope when you know better. My dragon blood is a different problem entirely! Even if you did kill me, that blood wouldn’t just up and disappear!”

“—Grr.”

“But if you still want to chase my cute little behind, then there’s no helping it.”

Glancing at Ferris, who was gritting his teeth painfully, Capella grinned as she slapped her chest with her hand. There was a *clap*, and then a moment later, a transformation happened around them.

“…Seriously?”

Guessing what had happened, Al looked around in annoyance. Noticing the same thing, Ferris and Anastasia’s expressions became tense.

—Moist sounds mixed with the sound of metal banging against walls as ferocious creatures surrounded them.

“—Demi-beasts.”

“Oh? What’s that? That’s a pretty decent name. Incomplete and hideous, half-dead and half-living. It’s a nice fit. I bet whoever came up with that has a great sense of humor.”

They appeared between Capella and the three of them. Some demi-beasts had swords in place of their heads, while others had axes instead of front legs, or shields for torsos, or some other body part swapped with a horrific replacement.

“…Why…? How could you do something like this?”

Ferris’s intense rage suddenly disappeared from his voice. His wide, yellow eyes were filled with an unbearable emotion as he stared at the demi-beasts.

It was pity, sympathy, and grief. A sadness for the existence of the demi-beasts.

“How can you do something so cruel…?!”

“How? Well…”

Capella touched her chin with a long, slender finger, making a show of pondering Ferris’s question before nodding slowly as if grasping the answer.

“…Probably because no one ever taught me not to play with corpses, I guess?”

“……”

“Don’t let her get inside your head, dumbass!”

Capella smiled venomously as Al held Ferris back from dashing forward. He stopped Ferris by wrapping his arm around Ferris’s slender waist while still holding his sword as he turned to Anastasia.

“Run now! Take the lead, and I’ll cover our asses!”

“Got it! This way!”

Anastasia grabbed Ferris’s arm and started running. Ferris didn’t put up any resistance as he was pulled along. He just bit his lip in frustration as his legs started moving.

And Al swung his liuyedao down on the demi-beasts that tried to follow after them.

“Goddamnit!”

“Flee, flee, get thee gone! If you don’t move quickly, more people will die! And more corpses means more demi-beasts! Go all out and murder every last one! Kya-ha-ha!”

Cackling as she watched them run away, Capella’s repellant figure melted into the darkness. Seeing that out of the corner of his eye, Al gnashed his teeth knowing there was no way he could chase after her.

All that was left was a sense of defeat, and that was quickly replaced by an overwhelming sense of unease as he kept running.

“Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

—And running.

CHAPTER 3

A WARRIOR'S ACCLAIM

1

Eight-Arms Kurgan was a legendary figure in the Volakian Empire.

The empire was already famed for its meritocracy, and compared with other countries, demi-human tribes had secured a relatively stable place for themselves within its borders. It had a different stance from the Kingdom of Lugunica, with its deep-seated racism against demi-humans; or the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko, which rejected all foreigners; or the Kararagi City State, which had not been around for very long as a nation.

Compared with most humans, demi-humans tended to have a greater aptitude for mana. Because of that, there were many demi-human tribes that used magic in an everyday manner, but the many-armed tribe was an exception. They were not blessed with an aptitude for controlling mana.

Their unique trait was, as their name suggested, the fact that their kind had three or more arms. They were easily distinguishable at a glance from their abnormal outlines, and they were extremely lacking in magic abilities compared with other demi-humans—because of that fact, they had long been treated as an inferior race.

What changed all that for them at a fundamental level was none other than Eight-Arms Kurgan himself.

From the time he was born, Kurgan was different from the rest of his tribe. The number of arms that members of the many-armed tribe had varied from individual to individual, with most clustered around the average of four or five. However, Kurgan was born with eight arms, making him a singular presence who was acknowledged as special from the start.

But what made him special was not just the number of arms he had. Treated as an inferior race for so long, most of the many-armed people tended to be peaceful and avoided fighting. However, Kurgan bore an unquenchable fighting spirit in his heart and was always longing for battle.

When he was twenty years old, his fighting spirit found an outlet.

The many-armed tribe did not have a homeland and were a wandering people who constantly moved from place to place. It was said that the reason for that was because they'd lost their homeland in a battle long, long ago, but the past meant nothing to Kurgan.

What mattered was the present. When a dispute cropped up between the tribe and the lord of the land where they had just moved, a certain young Kurgan was there to do something about it.

Seeking to evict what he viewed as a hideous and inferior race from his lands, the lord sent the soldiers he was so proud of after the tribe. And Kurgan killed every last one of them with his eight arms, bringing the battle all the way up to the lord's manor.

The lord paled at the barbarian tribe's retaliation, but Kurgan lowered his eight arms.

Boasting that he had proven the strength of his people, he earned himself a place as the lord's captain. After that, he went on to win honors and valor on countless battlefields, transforming the name *Eight-Arms* into legend.

And as a manifestation of the supremacy of martial prowess that the empire espoused, he would become its peerless champion.

There was a roaring *boom* as a Devil Cleaver hit Garfiel's shield and sent him flying.

The shock wave that followed echoed in his body as he placed all four limbs on the ground, feeling his life force burning inside him. Forcibly controlling his slide, he looked forward. He saw the cutting edge of one of the cleavers closing in right before him.

—His decision was instantaneous, his action was immediate, and the result was revealed a moment later.

"Rrrrrrraaaaaaahhhh!"

Swinging his arms, which had thrust through the pavement, he peeled the ground upward. The cleaver smashed through the hastily made wall, not even delayed a full second before reaching Garfiel's face.

There was a violent *creak* as Garfiel took the attack directly, getting pushed back. The soles of his feet tore into the ground, and two broken fangs clattered across the pavement.

“Don unnereftimate me!”

Garfiel howled as he bit down hard, his fangs now the only thing holding back the Devil Cleaver’s thrust.

His canines had been broken, and there was blood pouring from his torn-up mouth, but Garfiel did not hesitate.

The muscles in his neck and jaw exploded as he resisted Kurgan’s strength with all his body. Kurgan grabbed the hilt of the cleaver with another arm, pulling to free it from Garfiel’s jaws. But he could not get it out.

Garfiel’s upper body swelled as he half-transformed, breaking the legendary blade in his jaws.

Kurgan’s enormous body shuddered at the destruction of the blade—It was the perfect chance.

Garfiel’s decision was instantaneous, his action was immediate, and the result appeared the next moment as always.

“

At this rate, it'll—
“

The waterway he had fallen out of had been adjacent to this shelter and was pouring into it through the broken wall.

Having gotten that far, Garfiel shook himself to recover from his daze.

He looked all around for the giant he had been clashing with moments ago, the immovable figure that he had been burning at both ends to contend with—

"—Ah."

He suddenly met the eyes of a young, blond-haired boy with watery green eyes.

It was a face he recognized. A face that evoked a memory that tore at his heart. The boy who was with Garfiel's mother, who didn't recognize him when he had finally found her again.

The younger brother who had been in the place he had wanted to be, receiving his mother's unconditional love—

"—Ngh?!"

Just when his heart was absorbed in unneeded sentiment again, he heard a tremendous *splash*.

The eight-armed man was standing there, the shallow water exploding upward around him. And with Garfiel idling like a helpless scarecrow, Kurgan unleashed a merciless barrage with all his might.

The slightest delay in reaction was fatal. A moment's carelessness yielded a massive opportunity to the enemy.

And Eight-Arms Kurgan used that opportunity to hit Garfiel with eight different blows.

Even if Garfiel managed to block the first and second, he could not block the remaining six.

His face was knocked to the side, and two punches sent him up into the air, another overlapping punch slammed his body down, and when he hit the floor, yet another punch landed on his head to crush it once and for all. His face crashed into the bottom of the channel under the water, and his nose and fangs were badly broken, turning the water crimson from the torrent of blood.

"Bugaaa…rrrrrraaaaahhhh!"

He stood up and roared. Leaving a trail of blood behind him, Garfiel let out a cry that shattered the air in the shelter as he leaped in, swinging his fist up at the war god.

Their fists crossed paths. Cocking his head, he slipped past the downward punch, his fangs tearing into Kurgan from his wrist to

his elbow as he dug into Eight-Arms's chest with his right claw.

Blood erupted from the sharp cuts, carving a deep wound in the war god's flesh.

But Eight-Arms had another seven attacks incoming. Garfiel would have to use the entirety of his body to avoid all of them.

Every time they clashed, for every attack he could unleash, his opponent could answer with eight. That overwhelming disadvantage, that overwhelming disparity, and that overwhelming difference in fighting strength lit a fire in his heart—

"Ooooooooooooooooooo!!!!"

Attack, attack, attack, attack, attack, attack, attack—

Block, evade, dodge, parry, duck, deflect, match—

Their fists crashed into each other, creating a shock wave that blew the water around their feet away. A thunderous *boom* that sounded nothing like flesh meeting flesh reverberated as they both were knocked backward.

Water droplets scattered everywhere as the ferocious tiger and the war god somersaulted away.

"

Neither made a special signal, but it was a duel. A duel between the hero of Volakia, Eight-Arms Kurgan, and the lone warrior Garfiel.

—It was an out-of-place sentimentality, but the situation was oddly satisfying for Garfiel.

Withdrawing in the face of Reinhard, finding out his mother's memories of their time together had been locked away, yielding his chance for vengeance for the kindhearted girl who had protected him, getting caught up in the enemy's plans, and endangering an ally.

He had just been stuck watching events go by while a sense of powerlessness and loss had stolen so many things out of his hands.

In the past two days, Garfiel's heart had been stripped bare, and he had been forced to endure the bitter taste of his own weakness time after time.

—It was Kurgan who had reignited his spirit, which had been so worn down and shriveled.

The hero of Volakia, the war god, Eight-Arms. He was known by many names.

And that strongest of enemies was currently facing off against Garfiel with his weapons out.

It was impossible to explain just how much that meant to Garfiel. To explain just how much of an honor it was for a warrior to have Eight-Arms Kurgan draw his cleavers.

In the middle of the battle, Garfiel's consciousness had grown fuzzy after they had fallen into the waterway. A corpse revived by taboo arts, Kurgan did not have to breathe. If he had wanted just to finish the fight, he could have simply watched as Garfiel drowned.

But he didn't do that. The war god broke the wall of the waterway, opening a path into the shelter, allowing Garfiel to live.

Why had he done that?

"…I thought it was pity at first."

At the outset, when Garfiel's resolve was wavering, Kurgan had not acknowledged him as a warrior. Batting away a child charging with fists raised, kicking aside a whimpering opponent—those were not the actions of a warrior. Garfiel had let himself lose control in a fit of irritation, and so Kurgan had merely kept him at a distance.

But it was different now. Standing up and readying his shields, Garfiel was a true warrior.

And there was Eight-Arms, wielding his legendary Devil

Cleavers, his whole body bristling with fighting spirit. Did that look like mercy or pity? Absolutely not.

Kurgan desired a duel. He wished to fight Garfiel as fellow warriors.

And the only way to settle a battle between warriors was with a single, decisive clash.

"Hey, assholes…how long are you gonna keep starin'?"

Garfiel questioned the people who were watching his battle from a distance. The people whose shelter had been disturbed by Garfiel and Kurgan's violent intrusion.

There was no way any of them would be able to fight Kurgan if Garfiel was defeated. It was hard to imagine the war god finishing off people who couldn't even fight, but they would not know that.

So they should prioritize protecting themselves and—

"Gorgeous Tiger!"

"Ahh…?"

He had intended for them to take the hint and run away, but a high-pitched voice responded in an unexpected way.

Garfiel furrowed his brow. The voice was from one little boy in the middle of the shelter—a boy with tears in his eyes, his face red as he tightly gripped the hem of his clothes.

The boy's green eyes met Garfiel's matching gaze.

"Gorgeous Tiger!"

"Oy, kid…what are you…?"

"G-Gorgeous Tiger!"

The boy shouted with a trembling voice despite Garfiel's bewilderment.

He shouted that name as if he did not know any other way of expressing his feelings.

—*Gorgeous Tiger*.

That was the name of the golden tiger. The strongest tiger. The tiger that Garfiel Tinzel looked up to.

Why was he shouting that name now? What was he trying to say?

Hot tears streamed down the boy's red face.

Everyone else in the shelter heard the boy. So the intense swirl of emotion that he could not put into words was conveyed to all of

them, spreading.

"I'm tellin' ya to run away alrea—"

"Gorgeous Tiger!"

Garfiel's voice was drowned out by shouts of the golden tiger's name.

There was a girl with matching blond hair hugging the shouting boy from behind. She was his older sister. She was hugging him tight to protect him, even as she stared at Garfiel with her wavering green eyes.

Her lips trembled as she called out the name of the golden tiger in a voiceless cry.

"Win!"

It was neither the boy nor the girl, and it was obviously not Garfiel, either. It was another man who clenched his fist as he shouted.

"Don't worry about me and just—"

"Fight and win!"

"Don't lose!"

"W-we can't do anything except watch…but still!"

Garfiel was dumbfounded.

His calls for them to escape were being drowned out by new voices.

Before he realized it, the intensity that had begun as a single boy's voice had spread to everyone in the shelter, and not a single person there chose to flee from Garfiel and Kurgan's duel.

They were all filled with feverish excitement. Common sense dictated that there was no good reason for any of them to stay there. It was a meaningless act of stubbornness and faith that would only lead to pointless deaths.

"Looks like your performance worked a little too well, General."

Remembering Subaru Natsuki's words that had been heard throughout the city, he relaxed his shoulders a bit.

The strength of Subaru's weakness had lifted the spirits of the people in the city, and he could see the results of that before his eyes.

A smoldering ember in someone's heart could ignite at any moment if it was just given the right chance.

And for them, this was that very moment.

Just as this was that moment for Garfiel.

"Gorgeous Tiger!"

The calls were unending.

And the one who had taken the initiative and set it off was Garfiel's younger brother, who had been born without him knowing it.

And that boy's sister holding him from behind, who had also been born without his knowledge.

His younger brother and sister were watching him.

The city that had accepted his mother, who had lost her memories—the people of that city were watching Garfiel.

"It's a bit too noisy for a duel."

"

A horizontal slash came at his torso, but Garfiel raised his leg and stomped down on the blade to stop it. His heel stepping down onto the flat of the cleaver, the thick blade hit the stone floor, sending a thunderous *boom* echoing through the city.

That was one, but he did not have time to breathe easy.

At the same moment the first cleaver hit the floor, the second was tracing an arc from Kurgan's left side. When he heard the blade whistling through the air with his right ear, Garfiel guarded his head with both arms' shields. At that exact moment, the attack crashed into his arms, and his consciousness exploded in fireworks.

His right arm crumpled under the weight of the blow to his elbow, breaking his shoulder and wrist. He gritted his teeth so hard they cracked, but he endured it. That was two.

The third and fourth were bare-handed attacks that came at the same time.

Unleashed with the force of artillery shells, they took aim at Garfiel while his focus was hazy from the shock to his head. His torso and neck—either would be lethal if they landed—

The punch aimed at his torso made Garfiel's abs burn. Twisting his body while it felt like his stomach was on fire, he limited the damage to just tearing away the outer layer of his stomach. That was three.

Pushing his reflexes to the limit to evade, he raised his right arm to the attack approaching his face. His broken, shattered right arm took the heavy blow head-on, splattering and losing all trace of its original shape.

Everything from his elbow to his fingertips was crushed, and the shield fixed to his wrist was sent flying. But he managed to stop the devastating blow's momentum. He lowered his head, meeting the fist with his forehead, stopping the fourth blow with a headbutt.

The remaining fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth. Fast. Too fast. He could not help grinning. His cracked fangs trembled.

"—ooooooOOOOOOO!!!"

The fifth and sixth were also bare-handed. The last cleaver was kept in reserve for the decisive blow.

Kurgan attacked with the left arms extending from the back of his shoulder and his side. Garfiel's right arm, which he needed to defend, was already useless, and his left could not make it in time. Unflinchingly, he stepped forward with his right foot.

There was a splash from under his foot as his will was

transmitted to the earth. Sometimes, he drew on that strength; sometimes, he moved it at will; and this time, he borrowed the power of his blessing to—

The floor warped, raising Kurgan's foot.

But the war god crushed that disturbance without a moment's delay. There was not even a trace of hesitation or uncertainty in his moves. But for the briefest of moments, it created a tiny opening in his focus, and Garfiel took full advantage.

Raising his leg, he twisted himself so that his head passed just barely through the gap between the two fists, slipping through the valley of death.

When he landed, Garfiel shuddered at his own decisiveness.

He had no idea what had made him think of that, but there had been less than a second from having the thought to acting on it. His brain was burning. His heart was on fire. His spirit was erupting.

That was five and six down. And the seventh and eighth—

"

disappeared from his field of view. He reached perfect focus, and all that remained in Garfiel's consciousness was Kurgan.

The cleaver swung down toward Garfiel with an abnormal sluggishness.

His own movements to block it also seemed to be in slow motion.

With his world frustratingly slowed, all Garfiel could do was grit his teeth.

—No, he had time to sink into memories.

"

momentum refused to stop.

His left arm shattered, and with the remaining momentum, the blade closed in on Garfiel's neck. It still had more than enough force to crush Garfiel and transform his entire body into minced meat.

What was the war god thinking in that moment? Did he feel mercy or pity for the warrior whose life was about to end?

Of course not—there was no way a true warrior would feel pity for another warrior until after the opponent was well and truly dead.

Because of that—

"

With a roar, he opened his mouth wide and tore into the neck of the war god standing there before him.

His fangs pierced the hard, thick skin, tearing into the arteries so crucial to maintaining life. And with his fangs deep into Kurgan's neck, he twisted his body, using that momentum to tear at the muscle, his beastly jaw ripping out half of Kurgan's neck.

"Ngh, ah…"

Falling to the floor defenselessly, Garfiel spit out the hunk of flesh he had torn away. Feeling sick, he looked behind him, seeing Kurgan's back as a torrent of blood poured from his neck.

Both of Garfiel's arms were destroyed, he had lost lots of teeth, and he was on the verge of death from blood loss.

But the way that Kurgan stood tall there, that gallant figure unmoved even by a mortal wound to the neck—it was so noble and powerful that Garfiel couldn't help but shudder. A true champion among champions.

"

as much mana as he could to heal his wounds. It had been a fight where a normal person would have died a hundred times over at least. His instincts were telling him that if he passed out, he would die.

But even so, as he was trying to heal himself, his mind was slowly, gradually drifting toward a white emptiness—

"Gorgeous Tiger!"

What stopped him was a teary voice.

His brother and sister were running through the puddles to him. Other people seemed to be running over, too, but all he could see was the two of them.

They looked like they were crying— No, they were crying.

That made sense. Anyone could see that Garfiel's condition was not good. And an expert would only be able to say it was a miracle he was still alive at all.

Garfiel had undoubtedly been straddling the line between life and death for too long.

But for just this one moment, not as a warrior but—

"…Don't go cryin' over me."

Without realizing it, he smiled like an older brother to his younger siblings, who did not know the truth.

Hearing that, his brother bawled, and his sister blushed furiously.

"D-don't be stupid! I'm not crying! Just get some rest! We'll— we'll…find a healer for you…gh…"

"I…gotta do somethin'…first…"

Garfiel shook his head as his little sister managed to both be worried and stubbornly refuse to acknowledge it. His face still covered in blood, he tried to reach into a pocket in his waistcloth.

It was no good, though. His arm was too weak. He could not even do that much.

“Is this it, Gorgeous Tiger…?”

Seeing that Garfiel could barely move, his brother pulled what he was looking for out of the soaked and bloody pocket—the conversation mirror.

The metia that had been handed out before leaving in expectation of a difficult fight.

Lust had not been waiting at the control tower—so where had she gone?

“I gotta tell…”

“I-I’ll do it for you.”

Hearing Garfiel’s wheezing words, his sister took the mirror from their little brother’s hand and activated it. There was a faint light in the mirror as it connected to another mirror.

“Wh-what should I say?”

“Hold it…here… I’ll…”

Garfiel’s sister nervously held the gleaming mirror to Garfiel’s face. Looking into it, he waited for a response from the other end.

Praying that his comrades were okay.

The mirror flashed in order to deliver the message he had to send—

3

—Barely hanging on, Garfiel’s prayer reached out into darkening night of Pristella.

“Run, run, run, run, run, run!”

Three people were racing through the night in a desperate flight.

Exposed to the depredations of the Archbishop of Lust, who had abandoned her tower, they were now careening through the darkness with their collapsed headquarters at their backs.

“—Ngh.”

Swinging his sword, Al cut into the swarm of demi-beasts, already covered in a sheen of black blood as he ran.

He didn’t have any attention to spare for the path they were

taking. He had his hand full dealing with the swarm of demi-beasts leaping at him. While he was holding down the rear, the other two were running falteringly over difficult terrain.

They were moving slowly, and it was just a matter of time until the demi-beasts caught up to them.

“

and simultaneously a lamentation.

For those demi-beasts, who were victims whose bodies were used unnaturally, their lives twisted incomprehensibly, their souls warped irrationally.

“Kill every last one of them! Grant them a proper death!”

“Of course.”

She nodded in response to the knight with flaxen cat ears, who cried out in pain.

The man in the black helmet slumped to the ground, watching the woman in a kimono wheezing as she tried to catch her breath.

The crimson woman raised her sword high in the air and brought it down on the demi-beasts as if splitting the moon.

The blade fell on the beings whose lives had been toyed with, who had been pulled from death, whose flesh had been torn away from their rest into pitiful and twisted fates.

“Such a living death is unsightly—so I shall slay every last one of you.”

“—Raaahhhh!”

The demi-beasts howled, having lost even the instinct to fear death and avoid pain. The swarm did not hesitate to throw their lives to waste as a flame to scorch the whole city swelled, cremating all of them at once.

“—Pitiful people who desire despair and mistook prayers for wishes.”

The voice of a goddess rang out again, reciting another poetic passage while she swung her crimson blade as if in a dance.

They were not her words, though, but the words of a bard who had recorded a poem for posterity. However, the feelings imbued in it were unfaded, overcoming the walls of time to console the pitiful beings.

“—Thus ends the farce with thunderous applause!”

The flame purified all.

“—A parting ovation!”

—They were returned to ash without leaving anything behind. It was a true act of mercy.

CHAPTER 4

THE LOVE SONG OF THE SWORD DEVIL—FRAGMENT

1

A sharp attack, flying sparks, a white-haired man and red-haired woman dancing in the moonlight.

Their performance was fate as they continued to compose a miraculous display of swordsmanship.

“

to bring that moment to an end. And Theresia swung her peerless blade to meet the Sword Devil head-on.

—Her expression remained unmoved.

She was always quick to smile, quick to get annoyed, quick to pout.

When silent, she was beautiful like a sword, but she was hardly ever silent.

She was a woman like a field of flowers blooming in the warm sun.

—Except now, there was sadness. Sadness and nothing more.

"Even when worry and doubt fill your mind before taking up the sword, it ends once you draw your sword. You always understood that far better than I ever did."

In order to defeat Theresia, he had to achieve a level of swordsmanship that surpassed hers.

That had been Wilhelm's conclusion at the time, and the Sword Devil had in fact achieved that feat through ascetic training, shedding every bit of himself until all that remained was a single sword.

And having experienced that, he could state with confidence:

—Your swordsmanship is marvelous, but there's a cloudiness in the strength of your blade.

"Do you remember when we parted? Before the expedition, you shook free from me when I tried to stop you. When you gave me this unhealing scar on my shoulder? —I have never forgotten what passed between us then."

There was no answer. He never expected one.

It was just a rite Wilhelm used to reflect on that day. He remembered the day a sweetly throbbing wound that refused to heal was carved into his shoulder, forever engraving that moment into his mind.

The words Theresia said after pushing Wilhelm away to go on that fateful expedition.

—When I come back, let me finally hear your answer.

"I've come to fulfill my promise—!"

His swords cried out as they repelled Theresia's longsword completely. He could read it. He knew the arcs it would take. He

knew where she would aim like the back of his hand.

He knew with loving detail just how her sword would flash and reach forward.

“Rrrrrghhhhh!”

Her habits were the same. Her techniques were the same.

The desperation to reach her level, the searing drive that scorched his soul when he swore to defeat her and steal the sword from her hands.

It was the same swordsmanship as that of the woman he had dreamed of all those days. The same swordsmanship as that of the woman he loved with all his heart.

“

expressions.

Her tears, her anger, her pout, her smile—all those and more always appeared on that same lovely face.

Casting all that aside, Wilhelm thrust straight at her neck and chest—

“

him, if he had been able to stay resolute in loving Theresia and Theresia alone, he would not have allowed such an unsightly mistake to occur.

I vowed to steal Theresia away from the god of the sword if it took all my life. And yet I blunder like this?

"—Ngh."

His focus was broken, and now something was lacking in their resumed duel. An impurity had seeped into his blade. The Sword Devil, who had forged himself into a pure steel blade, was already no longer there.

All that remained was a lone, aged swordsman crossing blades with his beloved wife while his only son watched—

Because of that, what happened next was only natural.

"—Ngh?!"

Stopping the force of her longsword, Wilhelm took a half step back from the impact. The moment he tried to push her back, her slender frame twisted before his eyes, creating a momentary opening. His upper body wavered, which created a gap.

An instant later, he watched as the longsword pierced his right leg.

"

his lips before a cry of agony had time to emerge.

A white-hot blaze seemed to consume his body, but he could ignore the pain. He could endure that. But the despair he felt at his powerlessness, at his foolishness—that was not something he could overcome.

—Who could escape from the hell of one's own name?

“

wound.

It was the cold and rational decision of a goddess of death and not the pride of a woman who lived by the sword.

“Wa…it… Wait, Theresia!”

Without realizing it, Wilhelm had shouted in fear.

Forgetting the pain of his wounds, Wilhelm tried to grab onto Theresia. But she took half a step backward, evading his hand. She was beyond his reach. And she turned her back, her red ponytail swaying as she grew distant.

Slowly, as if Wilhelm shouting behind her was beneath her.

—Her feet were carrying her toward Heinkel, who was standing stock-still.

“Eep.”

After defeating the enemy who stood before her, her fiendish blade welcomed the arrival of a new quarry. Cutting down the man she did not recognize was her husband, she would next cut down the man she did not recognize was her son. And so—

“Stop, Theresia! Do you… Do you think I’ll allow that?! Fight me! Look at me… Look at me! Look at me, Theresiaaaa!!!”

He roared Theresia’s name. Like a desperate animal, he forced strength into his leg, beckoning more blood loss as he called after her. He shouted, anger welling in place of the love that always filled his voice when he spoke her name.

But she did not turn back.

She wielded a technique that took full advantage of the reaper’s strength, her feet carrying her toward Heinkel. And gulping as she approached him, Heinkel drew the sword at his waist with a quivering hand.

“No way.” He shook his head like a child in denial. “You’re lying, right? ‘Theresia’? That’s impossible…! It can’t be Mom…”

“

If nothing changed, Heinkel would unmistakably be cut down by Theresia.

Wilhelm could not allow that to happen.

“Theresia! Here! I’m still alive! If you’re going to kill, then kill me first! Heinkel! You can’t face her! Run now!”

Driving his sword into the ground, Wilhelm used it as support to lever himself to his feet. The bleeding worsened, and his head felt like it was about to split from the pain. But he pressed forward, leaving a trail of red in his wake.

Far. She was too far away. Slow. He was too slow.

Wilhelm would not make it in time again. Just like before.

“Ugh, ahhHHHH!”

The moment the tip of Theresia’s blade quivered, she drove Heinkel’s sword from his hand.

The blade that clattered across the pavement was named Astrea. Ironically, it was the blade that Wilhelm himself had passed on to Heinkel.

“S-stop…stop, M-Mom…”

Losing his sword, Heinkel fell backward to the ground, cowering in fear. Desperately trying to scoot backward to escape the nightmare before his eyes.

But the eyes of the mother from his youth bound him, halting his trembling fingers, paralyzing his heart, not allowing him to get away.

—The reaper’s blade extended up into the sky as if to split the moon.

In that critical moment, Wilhelm could do nothing, forced to watch as his wife was about to cut down their son.

He called out, but his voice did not reach. He stretched out his hand, but it was hopeless.

He could not reach her.

“Theresiaaaa!”

The Sword Devil, who had devoted everything to the sword, had no power left save to shout.

The blade swung down emotionlessly in order to claim Heinkel’s life—

“That’s enough.”

That voice suddenly but unmistakably tore through the impenetrable curtain of despair.

There was no trace of hesitation in that dignified tone nor the slightest hint of mercy. It conveyed an absolute supremacy that bent all before it and imposed an overwhelming sense of presence on everyone who heard it.

Wilhelm, Heinkel, and even Theresia were swallowed up by that voice.

The next moment, one man descended from the sky, landing gallantly before the reaper.

“

“—Reinhard.”

He was standing there with the sheath in his left hand, and the Dragon Sword in his right hand.

It was none other than Reinhard van Astrea, the current Sword Saint, who scowled at the scene before him as his red hair fluttered in the wind.

His dignified, gallant figure overawed even Wilhelm.

There stood his grandson, the man who had inherited the blessing of the Sword Saint and been given the role of the kingdom’s blade as a knight in the royal guard. In truth, it was the first time Wilhelm had ever seen him standing on the battlefield.

After losing Theresia in the expedition, Wilhelm had left the Astrea house in order to claim his revenge. And during those fifteen years, the discord between his son and grandson had remained unresolved.

Because of that, Wilhelm had never once faced his family properly since his leaving. He never once allowed himself to see his son’s corruption or his grandson’s growth and sense of responsibility.

—Because of that, he felt overwhelmed by Reinhard’s presence.

The one standing there was the very embodiment of the Sword Saint.

Granted the honor of drawing the greatest sword ever made, graced with all the love of the god of the sword, the person who stood atop the summit that every swordsman so desperately dreamed of—he was the Sword Saint.

—And seeing Reinhard like that, Wilhelm remembered.

The pain was long forgotten. What he remembered was something far, far more distant.

It was the feeling that he had when he first saw the Sword Saint Theresia’s blade dance.

In that moment, Wilhelm had felt the unbridgeable distance between him and the pinnacle of the sword. He had mourned his lack of talent, his inability to step into that realm of sword skill.

But even so, he had not allowed himself to rust away and instead swung his blade, constantly swinging his blade, until he finally managed to stretch his fingertips to the edge of that summit. He had proven that there was no distance that could not be overcome.

—How narrow and small his world had been.

The quality was different. The height was different. The weight was different. It was different in every possible way.

It was not something even remotely in the realm of achievable.

It was something that quite literally lived in a different world from everyone and everything else.

“

Wilhelm's pleading was silenced by Reinhard's resolute voice. Emotional rhetoric could not begin to match even one of the countless important duties that the Sword Saint bore.

Wilhelm fell silent as Reinhard readied the Dragon Sword, pointing straight at his opponent.

By chance, his stance was a mirror image of Theresia's.

"

The emotions he had sealed away, the intense feelings he had suppressed, the love that he had not allowed himself to wish for broke through the dam and flooded out.

Theresia was right there.

The woman who had set his heart racing, who had made him take notice of the world beyond the sword, the one woman in all his life for whom he would gladly trade everything.

The woman he loved more than anything. She was standing right there before him. The woman whom he had never once told that he loved her—

"That's my Theresiaaaa!!!"

He said something that should never have been voiced.

Prioritizing his own emotions on a battlefield where a moment's distraction was fatal was unforgivable.

It was an action that defiled everything, tarnishing the pride of a swordsman, the honor of warrior, and the upright manner in which a battle should be carried out.

It was just the voice of one man.

A man who desperately wanted the woman he loved to not be stolen away from him.

And his desperate cry was—

"—Grandmother died fifteen years ago because of me."

Theresia's slash closed in on Reinhard. In that instant, the Dragon Sword still had not moved. Theresia's long blade erupted in light.

"This is just an imposter."

—The Dragon Sword Reid traced a brilliant arc.

CHAPTER 5

THERESIA VAN ASTREA

1

How surprised would you be if I told you that I fell for you from the moment we first laid eyes on each other?

2

"—Brother, the next Sword Saint is your daughter, Theresia."

With those words, the previous generation's Sword Saint mercilessly revealed his niece's deception.

That was the day Theresia, at the tender age of twelve, received the blessing of the Sword Saint.

—That was the day the world collapsed around Theresia.

The Astrea family was a famed house that gave birth to each and every generation of Sword Saint.

In honor of the great feats achieved by the first Sword Saint, Reid Astrea, hundreds of years ago, the Astrea family had long borne the honor of serving as the sword of the Kingdom of Lugunica.

Because of that, male or female, no member of the Astrea household lived a life untouched by the sword.

Theresia was no exception. And because of that, she did not like her ancestor Reid Astrea. In fact, she hated him.

Theresia was scared of the blessing of the grim reaper, which she had been born with.

The wounds that she caused others would never heal. They would simply bleed forever. When she realized the power of that blessing, the young Theresia became scared of even herself.

And so to not allow anyone to find out about her blessing, she chose to seal away her strength.

—Going about life without ever injuring anyone was far more difficult than she had imagined once she had decided on it.

Even if she did not intentionally try to hurt someone, there was still danger lurking around every corner in daily life. Her blessing did not pick and choose, and a careless accident or a thoughtless action could happen at any time.

She wanted to keep her blessing hidden, which meant she hated the household's mandatory sword training.

—I must not hold a sword. Because I am a reaper.

Driven by powerful determination and gripping fear, Theresia tried to distance herself from the sword. She used any excuse to

avoid training, and eventually, her family gave up on trying to make her wield a sword.

And so finally, she achieved peace of mind, far removed from the fate bestowed on her at birth. Casting aside the sword, she was allowed to live like a normal girl, choosing to spend her days admiring flowers.

—The blessing of the Sword Saint transferred to her one day while she was in the middle of tending to the garden.

"Take up your sword, Theresia."

When Theresia hid herself away in her room to try to conceal that she had inherited the blessing, her uncle mercilessly dragged her out against her will and gave her that instruction.

Her hair and clothes were a mess, and she was sobbing, but her uncle forced her to stand in the garden and said it again.

"Take up your sword, Theresia."

Even though she furiously shook her head and refused over and over, her uncle forced her to grip the wooden sword. Finally giving up, she limply held it in her hand. Grabbing her head, her uncle forced her to look in front of her.

It was her eldest brother. Theresia had two older brothers and one younger brother. The eldest was kind, the sort of person whose good nature showed on his face. He doted on Theresia, and she adored him.

—So full of openings.

She was stunned to realize the thought that crossed her mind when she looked at him.

But ignoring her shock, her uncle ordered her brother to fight with Theresia. To crush his little sister with the wooden sword in order to demonstrate his talent.

"There's no way I can do that," he shouted.

"Coward!" her uncle berated him.

Scorned by the Sword Saint he had looked up to all his life, her brother twisted his expression into a terribly pained grimace. Her two other brothers, who had also been brought out into the yard as witnesses, wore similar pained expressions.

Finally, though he was still visibly hurt, a sorrowful resolve filled her eldest brother's eyes.

She could sense it. He intended to swing the wooden sword in his hand so as not to hurt Theresia. She could tell it from the stance

he took, from where his eyes were trained, from the very air that hung about him.

With Brother's skill, it shouldn't be difficult. If it's him, he can put an end to this farce.

"—That's enough."

Theresia returned to her senses to see a wooden sword land, sticking out of the ground far away from them. There was a sense of marvel in her uncle's voice that made it clear the match had been decided. After all, Theresia's wooden sword was pointing straight in front of her, right at the throat of her dumbfounded eldest brother.

"The next Sword Saint is Theresia. There is no mistaking it."

Her uncle's voice as he said that and the way her brother's eyes looked into hers broke Theresia's heart.

She shook her head, crying out as she threw the wooden sword aside and cradled her head. Howling like a wild animal, she tore at her red hair in despair.

Screaming, half mad, desperately mourning and regretting everything, Theresia became the Sword Saint.

3

The time and effort that her brothers had devoted to the sword was mercilessly crushed before Theresia's genius.

Time and effort were meaningless before an overwhelming, natural-born talent. And she found her brothers pitiful. Despite being shown the vast gap between them, they still could not abandon the sword.

Why were they still swinging their swords, even though they would never reach her no matter how long they spent on it?

Why, when they could just do anything they wanted? When they could be forgiven for abandoning the sword?

Even if it was no longer an option for Theresia, they at least could live in the world they wished to live in.

Take up your sword, Theresia.

Ever since that day, when Theresia defeated her brother and became the Sword Saint, that voice in her ears never disappeared.

Ever since then, she had not once picked up a sword. Disobeying that voice, she kept trying to distance herself from the sword. But the sword would not let her escape.

It was hell. The inescapable hell of her own mind.

But even those hellish days were nothing compared with the true hell that awaited.

The kingdom's largest and bloodiest internal conflict started—the Demi-human War.

It began with a trivial incident, but it grew more serious with each passing day.

The kingdom had a deep-seated scorn of demi-humans to begin with. The sparks of discontent among the demi-humans ignited the kindling that had been there all along, leading to an explosive civil war whose raging flames consumed the entire kingdom in a matter of days.

Having spent a year trying to put out the flames with nothing to show for it, the kingdom finally acknowledged the unprecedented nature of the problem and decided to send in their strongest weapon—the Sword Saint.

—With her first deployment at hand, Theresia was curled up, clutching her knees, and trembling all alone in her tent.

Because it was her first deployment, she was sent out at the head of a massive host of kingdom forces. Most soldiers volunteered to take part in hopes of fighting alongside the current-generation Sword Saint in her first battle. The constant refrain of callous confidence at having the Sword Saint on their side battered Theresia's heart.

And she could not share her unease with anyone—

"—Theresia, are you scared?"

The one who noticed was her eldest brother, who had accompanied her for her first battle.

Ever since what happened that day, Theresia had intentionally avoided interacting with him—no, not just him. She distanced herself from every one of her brothers, and her parents and her uncle, too, avoiding them all as much as she could.

It had been almost two years since she'd talked to the kind older brother whom she loved so much.

She hung her head, unable to bring herself to say anything. Her brother just sat next to her, wrapped a strong, reliable arm around her shoulder, and gently patted her head.

Theresia's emotions broke free, and she started sobbing.

She thought she wasn't allowed to complain. She had thought she couldn't allow herself to do that to the brother she had so terribly defeated of all people. But even so, she couldn't hold back.

She clung to him, crying as she said that she was scared, that she didn't want to fight, and that she was sorry.

"You're my precious little sister. If you don't want to do something, if something scares you…then I will protect you. Because I'm your older brother."

"

sword.

4

Theresia's first battle ended in a massive defeat.

The shameful truth of the new Sword Saint's first inglorious battle was buried and covered up. The existence of the Sword Saint was a pillar of moral support for the entire kingdom. The last thing the kingdom wanted was for the truth to get out.

And so Theresia was not scorned for fleeing in the face of the enemy, and she continued to hide away in her shell.

Her kind and gentle oldest brother, Thames, who would listen to any of her requests no matter how difficult.

Her other older brother, Carlan, who could be a bit ill-tempered but was always the first to apologize when it was time to make up.

Her cute little younger brother, Cajiress, a scaredy-cat and a crybaby who always clung to Theresia when he was young.

They all went to battlefields to fight in Theresia's stead, and they all died.

—I was always burdening you. I'm sorry, Theresia.

Her uncle, who used his status as the previous Sword Saint to raise the spirits of the army, died as well.

She wanted to be able to hate her uncle. If it were not for him, she might have been able to hide that she had inherited the blessing of the Sword Saint. Were it not for that, her brothers would not have had any reason to be so determined to protect her, and maybe none of them would have died in the internal struggles.

It would have been easier if she could think that. But she knew that was not true.

Her uncle understood the weight of the title of Sword Saint better than anyone.

He had experienced the same thing that Theresia had. That was why he had left those final words of apology. He understood how much was being asked of Theresia for the sake of the kingdom and how cruel that fate was.

That apology kept her from being able to hate him anymore.

So then who was left to blame? There was no one left to blame save herself.

Her foolish self, who could do nothing but cry despite having inherited the blessing and title of the Sword Saint.

Take up your sword, Theresia.

She still heard the voice, even after her uncle who had said it to her had died.

Trying to escape the voice, Theresia left the manor and wandered outside.

—Five years after the start of the Demi-human War, Theresia turned nineteen.

The capital had grown dull and lifeless from the drawn-out civil war, and a pall hung over the streets. Avoiding such a dark stroll, Theresia's feet carried her to the edge of the capital, to a neighborhood of ramshackle buildings.

The construction had been stalled because of the war, so half-built buildings were simply left standing. As a Sword Saint who was unable to fulfill her role, she felt an affinity with those husks that could not fulfill their role as buildings.

Her sigh dissipated into the clear, cool morning air as she headed to an open space in the block of abandoned buildings. It was an empty space unfit to even be called a plaza. Sitting down on a stone step, she looked over the crumbling wall.

There was a field of bright-yellow flowers growing wild and untended.

A secret place unknown to anyone. Taking advantage of that, Theresia had spread flower seeds there. She did not have the willpower to take the time to manage the flower beds at the manor that had faded.

She just came to watch the results of the seeds that she had scattered on a whim. That was why she brought herself there.

"…Growing up this well even though I didn't water you? You're amazing."

The flowers were strong. She spent her time lamenting her own weakness, but the flowers faced the sky and spread their petals, blooming beautifully. That strong, noble manner of life almost made her cry.

—That was when she noticed a thorny presence approaching.

"Oh, pardon me."

Theresia's morning sanctuary was rudely disturbed by the arrival of a person with a dangerous air about him.

Someone almost saw her tears, but she forced herself to act calm, feigning ease as she spoke and began to face the person who had intruded on her hideaway.

When she turned around, she was stunned.
“

5

After that, he and Theresia met each other frequently.

Not because they made a promise or because they particularly thought they wanted to.

Theresia just sat on the stone steps and looked out at the flowers while the man immersed himself in practice, swinging his well-crafted sword— The two of them being there at the same time became a common sight in that hidden little plaza.

“

She could see the true quality of any famed sword, sacred sword, demonic sword, and even the Dragon Sword itself. And she could freely use any of them with equal ease. There was no steel that would not lie bare in her hands.

Except him. He was the one blade that she could not freely wield.

That was surely why she took such an interest in him.

"I am Wilhelm Trias."

It was three months after their first meeting that they finally introduced themselves.

No matter how many times they had seen each other, Wilhelm resolutely refused to ask her name. The only reason it happened when it did was because Theresia grew so exasperated that she made up her mind to ask.

"I thought of you as Flower Girl in my head until now."

How rude.

There was not a trace of consideration; he was always only focused on himself, getting satisfied with the littlest bit of conversation and then leaving, while Theresia's heart was just tossed about.

"Do you like flowers?"

"No, I hate them."

Even when she showed him her special garden, that was all the response she got.

There was no mistaking he was physically incapable of being nice to anyone or deliberately saying something to make them happy.

She would erupt indignantly at that, but she was helpless because the next thing she would think was *But it's because he's like that that he's so much like a sword…*

The Sword Saint was being thrown off her stride by the existence of a blade that she could not control as she wished. At the time, she did not realize that it was also saving her.

"Have you started to like flowers?"

"No, I hate them."

"Why do you swing your sword?"

"Because it is all I have."

At some point, that exchange became a standard feature of their mornings.

What answer was she hoping for when she kept asking the same questions?

Was she hoping for the same answer, or did she secretly wish for the answer to change? Or did it not matter, and did she just want to talk with him?

Unable to change herself, what answer was she searching for in Wilhelm?

—And suddenly, without any signs, the answer came.

Theresia happened to be the first to arrive that day.

Looking out at the flowers as the wind blew, Theresia waited impatiently for him to arrive. By that point, she was aware of what her real goal was in coming to that little plaza.

"—Wilhelm."

Caught up in her faint emotion, Theresia turned when she sensed his presence.

Seeing him at the entrance of the plaza, she smiled as warmth filled her heart.

"

Wilhelm was a sword. But he was incomplete.

And now, with that heat, he was in the process of changing, of reforging himself.

—If it's a sword I am dealing with, then as Sword Saint, I should understand.

If it's him, if it's this sword, then I should be able to want to understand.

"Have you…started to like flowers?"

And as she thought that, her usual question came to her lips.

If someone else were to see them, it would surely sound like an out-of-place question. But it was enough for the two of them.

"…I…don't hate them."

And there was a new response to her usual question.

—Theresia had feared the day when Wilhelm's answer might change.

As if fearing being left behind while everyone else was moving on.

Scared that she might experience the terror of being left behind when he changed.

But that didn't happen. His change only made him all the more precious to her.

That steel, that simple blade, changing in order to become stronger only became all the dearer.

"Why do you swing your sword?"

So that question would surely have a different answer, too.

And that answer might just be the answer that granted Theresia salvation—

"Because it is all I have… Because I can't think of any other way to protect things."

Yes, because he has nothing but the sword.

He'll be fine because that's the sort of person he is.

After that, their usual exchange stopped.

Instead, they spoke more, the topics changed, and the number of smiles steadily went up.

Wilhelm pushed himself with his clumsy conversational abilities, while she felt her feelings for him grow.

"I was granted an award and made a knight."

She would never forget the way he broke the news that day or the odd intensity in his demeanor.

Theresia had trouble dealing with other people and had spent a long time avoiding others, but she was not so stupid as to misunderstand the true meaning of what he had worked up the courage to say.

For a simple commoner to be recognized as a knight through sheer battlefield prowess was unheard of. So what had he hoped for in confessing that he had been awarded the honor of becoming a knight?

"I see. Congratulations. That's one step closer to your dream, isn't it?"

She understood exactly why he'd brought it up, so she intentionally responded in a disinterested way.

If she was not careful, she was going to start blushing, so in order to keep that from happening, she relied on the full strength of the Sword Saint's abilities to keep her calm and smile casually.

"My dream?"

"You are wielding your sword in order to protect people, right? A knight is someone who protects others, after all."

Wilhelm immediately nodded respectfully. He was always such a sourpuss, but every once in a while, he would respond with such childlike honesty.

—It would be nice if I was one of the things he wanted to protect.

She hated herself for being indirect about it as insurance, even though she was almost completely sure of the answer.

Even though she was sure that they both cared about each other, she was a fool who could not bring herself to act. She hated that about herself, and because of it, she made another mistake.

Thinking back on it, Theresia could not find a single time she had done the right thing.

6

Worried about his home, Wilhelm threw himself onto the battlefield alone.

The moment she heard that report, Theresia turned deathly pale. Without thinking, she sank to her knees. The servant at her side was flustered, but she could not respond.

Theresia immediately understood just how hopeless the situation was.

Take up your sword, Theresia.

As Theresia silently stared at the floor, she heard the familiar old voice.

The voice that she had not heard for so long. Ever since meeting Wilhelm, since she started to have feelings for him, the voice had distanced itself from Theresia.

She had never once thought the voice was good. But just this once, it was right. The voice pleading with Theresia to wield her sword was correct.

"—Take up your sword, Theresia."

Repeating the words herself, she stood up.

She had left everything to her brothers and pushed the responsibility onto her uncle, too, letting all of them die.

Because she had not fought, many people had died.

But she could not hand him over. Wilhelm alone was different.

That sword, that steel—that person is mine and mine alone.

"Take up your sword, Theresia. This time, I will."

—The front established around Wilhelm's hometown was on the brink of collapse.

It was a hellish battlefield where screams and shouts filled the air alongside the stench of blood and smoke. Experiencing that utterly appalling scene, Theresia saw memories of her bitter first battle flash in her mind.

Those memories had tormented Theresia countless times. She had even imagined herself standing on the battlefield, bearing the weight of so many people's expectations and brilliantly fulfilling her role as Sword Saint.

But the harsh reality easily crushed those beautifully imagined scenes.

"

of iron so thick that it was hard to breathe.

Just then, she spotted a demi-human swinging a greatsword down at Wilhelm, who was collapsed on the ground. Looking up with a bloody face, Wilhelm was watching the demi-human. His lips moved, and a quiet, hoarse voice escaped.

"I don't want to die…"

—It's okay. It'll be okay.

She could not hear anything.

She swung the longsword in her hands. It was light.

There was no sound. There wasn't even an impact as she easily severed the demi-human's head.

The sword was still up as the corpse collapsed slowly, missing its head. The next moment, Theresia's slender form attracted the attention and hostility of enemies from all angles.

She could see the paths of the hostility raining down on her. She could read it. Feel it on her skin. Slip through it.

Evading, Theresia traced the strange white line that she saw before her with her sword.

It was a mysterious thing. At some point, a white line had appeared, floating in the air. And even more mysteriously, she instinctively understood that she needed only trace the path of that line.

There was a gust of wind as the blade passed through the air, and the demi-humans in the path of the white line were split in two, erupting with massive spatters of blood.

Limbs were severed, heads were removed, stomachs pierced, lives reaped.

Having finally been given the opportunity, the blessing of the Sword Saint, the blessing of the grim reaper exploded.

"Lady Theresia…gh…"

There was a voice calling to her in the battle. It was the servant who had remained at Theresia's side throughout everything.

She had never abandoned Theresia, not when she turned her back on her role as Sword Saint, not after she ran in the face of the enemy during her first battle, not even when Theresia herself ceased to be able to expect anything of herself.

The servant always said it.

Lady Theresia, someday, given the opportunity, you will be stronger than anyone and be able to act as the Sword Saint. And I will continue to support you until that time comes.

She had been right. Theresia was stronger than anyone, better at killing than anyone.

—If only she had realized it sooner.

“

She could not endure the hatred, the compassion, the negative emotions that filled his eyes.

"Don't wield a sword with a look like that on your face!"

It was Wilhelm who had devoted himself entirely to the sword, believing in the beauty of the blade and the preciousness of steel more than anyone else. She finally reached an understanding with her strength as she kicked aside his everything, trampling all over his strength.

It was none other than Wilhelm Trias who had given her the answer.

"Because I'm the Sword Saint. I never knew why before now, but I finally understand."

"Under…stand…ngh."

"Wielding a sword in order to protect someone. I think that is a good answer for me, too."

To protect people with her murderous power, her loathsome curse. To protect Wilhelm.

Protect him, protect her family, protect the masses, and protect the country. Become a worthy Sword Saint. A Sword Saint stronger than anyone.

Because I am the strongest. Because the Sword Saint is the strongest.

"Wait…Theresia…"

She almost stopped at the voice that called out to her, but after mustering every muscle in her body, she managed to endure.

But even so, Wilhelm's voice still reached her ears. And her heart.

"I will steal the sword away from you. Forget blessings or roles. What it means to swing a sword… Don't look down on the beauty of a blade, Sword Saint…!"

He swore to steal it away.

Even then, that never-ending hallucination echoed in Theresia's head.

It was like the god of the sword was ridiculing the talentless swordsman who dared to dream of defeating the Sword Saint.

—As if it was ridiculing his beloved daughter whose heart was swayed by the faintest of hopes.

Sensing an overpowering presence approaching from behind, Theresia spun around instinctively.

There was a stir as the excitement and enthusiasm gripping the people attending the ceremony was shattered. Not heeding any calls to halt, a man—no, a swordsman had appeared at the ceremony.

It was both a memorial service and celebration of the end of the Demi-human War. This was also a formal introduction of the Sword Saint, Theresia van Astrea, into greater society, highlighting the one who had contributed the most to bringing the civil strife to an end.

Wearing a formal outfit and holding a ceremonial sword, Theresia questioned her sanity.

Theresia couldn't believe what she was seeing. It was impossible. It had to be a nightmare, or an illusion created by the Sword God's twisted love.

The Sword Devil, who stood before Theresia, was wielding a blunt, rusted blade.

"

—I can't get enough of him.

With each exchange, her feelings only grew. She wanted to cast aside her sword and leap into his arms.

But she couldn't do that. That wasn't allowed. She was stopped, not by the god of the sword, but by the Sword Devil himself.

He had sworn to steal her away with his own strength, and he refused to accept anyone's help. Even if it came from her.

He would steal the Sword Saint away from her with his own strength, with his own persistence, with what he had gained by devoting everything to the sword.

How many tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions upon millions of times had he swung his sword while thinking of her?

Their swords met again, locking and pushing, flashing as they performed countless parries, until finally—

"My…"

"

only to be expected since he's a sword.

"What a terrible person. Taking someone's determination, resolve, and everything else and putting it all to waste."

"I'll inherit every last bit of that. Just forget about wielding a sword and take it easy… I have an idea. You can just grow some flowers and live in peace behind me."

"Protected by your sword?"

"Yes."

"Will you protect me?"

"Yes."

If she would be counted among the things precious to him, if he would answer the love she felt for him…

Theresia smiled at the Sword Devil's words—at Wilhelm's words.

And touching the sword held at her neck, she took a step forward.

She could feel Wilhelm's countless days of refinement through the blade. Tears beaded in her eyes as an unstoppable emotion filled her entire being.

The tears slowly trickled down her cheeks as she smiled, her blue eyes glittering.

"Do you like flowers?"

"I stopped hating them."

"Why do you swing your sword?"

"In order to protect you."

She had hit her limit.

From the moment the sword left her hand, she could no longer hear the voice of the Sword God.

She could only see Wilhelm.

She could only feel Wilhelm.

There was nothing save Wilhelm.

Clinging to his chest, she closed her eyes and pressed her lips against his. It was a warm, soft feeling that caused Theresia's love to explode as her world suddenly changed.

Blushing, she looked at her beloved standing before her.

Wilhelm did not say anything, quietly waiting for her to speak.

Seeing that, Theresia giggled. There was no helping it; she would have to ask first, just like always.

"Do you love me?"

"—You know the answer to that."

He looked to the side.

Theresia's eyes widened at that response, but just as quickly, she puffed out her cheeks as she pouted. She leaned forward, refusing to let him get away from it after they'd come so far.

"Come on now, there are certain things that should actually be put into words."

"Hah."

Scratching his hair, Wilhelm turned his head as if trying to slip away. But finally, he exhaled and gave in to Theresia's insistent stare, wrapping his arms around her slender waist. And then to Theresia's surprise, he leaned his lips close to her ear and whispered, "Someday, when the mood strikes me."

—I've got a feeling it will be a long time before that happens.

She was annoyed by that answer, but she also felt a thrill when she imagined that day might finally come.

Theresia had fallen so head over heels for Wilhelm that she was willing to forgive his selfishness.

9

"I love you, Wilhelm."

"

Wilhelm would hold her close. He would peel away the cloak behind which Theresia tried to hide her deepest fears and forcibly intervene.

And that was all she needed.

“Do you love me?”

“

She looked her husband in the eye. His hair had started to turn white, but his appearance had only grown more intense and masculine with age. Nothing had changed about either the intensity of emotion in his blue eyes or the powerful feelings he had for Theresia.

It was the face of the man who loved Theresia and whom Theresia loved.

She shook her head.

“I’ve already decided.”

“How could you?! Where did you even hear about…?”

Given how stubborn Theresia was being, Wilhelm realized that someone must have suggested it to her. A moment later, the Sword Devil’s face was a mask of rage. Unable to suppress it any longer, his battle aura seemed to make the very air start to spark.

“The fool! He should know some shame…!”

“Neither you nor I have the right to say that.”

She regretted what had happened to their son just as much as Wilhelm did. That was precisely why she didn’t want him to blame Heinkel. Grasping her feelings, Wilhelm gritted his teeth and calmed himself. It was proof that he had grown up just a little bit.

And now that he was grown-up, he had far too many things weighing down on his shoulders to just cast everything aside at a moment’s notice.

Wilhelm couldn’t take part in the hunt for the White Whale.

The castle was in an unprecedented state of panic—the daughter of the king’s brother had been kidnapped by someone, and the royal guard was devoting all their power to finding the perpetrator and Ford’s child.

And naturally, as the captain of the royal guard, Wilhelm had to devote his time and energy to that mission.

And so since the Sword Devil could not join the expedition, it was requested that Theresia participate instead as the one who still possessed the blessing and title of the Sword Saint, even if it had been a great many years since she last taken up the sword.

Theresia remembered Wilhelm promising to never let her wield a sword again.

And in truth, he had kept his word. She had lived a tranquil life, tending her flowers, protected by him. But it had come time to part with that life.

“Wilhelm. Do you love me?”

“Wha—?”

Still not willing to listen, he was frozen by his wife’s smile as she asked that question for the first time in a long while.

Still smiling, Theresia took advantage of his shock and ran her hand across her husband’s shoulder, scratching him. Ever since she married him, she had become able to control her blessing of the grim reaper, but this time, she purposefully used it to wound him.

Looking at the shallow scratch on his shoulder, Wilhelm widened his eyes.

It was not a deep cut, but the blood flowed with no sign of slowing or stopping. It would continue to do so for as long as Theresia was by his side.

“Theresia?”

She softly leaned against her husband’s broad chest.

Feeling the warmth of his arms around her, Theresia kissed the cut on his shoulder.

Her lips were painted crimson as she tasted her husband’s blood for the first time.

“With this, you can’t follow me. If you do, this wound won’t close.”

“Is that why you did such a foolish thing? You should know that won’t stop me from pursuing you.”

“If you do that, then this will all be meaningless.”

Giggling softly, Theresia let go of him. And then she pointed to the wound on his shoulder.

“Leave the wound like that. As a reminder to not come after me. Once we’ve both finished our jobs, I’ll take care of it for you.”

“

“For now?”

Theresia nodded as Wilhelm furrowed his brow.

The wound on her husband’s shoulder was a vow to meet again —

“—When I come back, let me finally hear your answer.”

11

Her memories leaped forward.

She could barely see in front of her. It was like she was standing in the middle of a sandstorm. Sounds seemed muffled and distant as well.

“—!”

She heard someone shout, then another cry, and a scream.

The expeditionary force that had set out to defeat the White Whale had completely collapsed.

There was a thick fog swirling around, and no one knew where to flee. They all raised their voices in a directionless urge to escape the oppressive feeling overwhelming them.

“

the bottomless, innate talent that Reinhard possessed.

Either way, Theresia knew without a doubt that Reinhard was the Sword Saint who would succeed her.

That was perhaps a betrayal to Heinkel, who had looked up to and yearned after the title of Sword Saint for so long, but there was no time and no one left to criticize her for it.

"—Oh, a woman all alone in a place like this? That's quite brave."

"—Ngh."

Theresia shuddered and turned around when she heard an elegant, decidedly out-of-place voice.

A girl with platinum hair appeared from out of the thick fog. She had a gentle smile and a benevolent gaze that evoked a sense of unconditional friendship with an unknown person.

It was a love mismatched, twisted, and far too great. This did nothing but evoke fear.

"Awww, I was rejected."

Casting aside the Dragon Sword, which she could no longer draw, Theresia picked up the longsword at her feet and charged.

It was a decision she would never have made under normal circumstances, but in a world of death shrouded by the White Whale's fog, a girl calmly walking around was not just a mystery—she was a threat.

Even without the blessing of the Sword Saint, Theresia was still capable of wielding the sword with all her old skill. The slash she unleashed contained more than enough power to cut clean through the girl's body—

"—I want to understand you."

The next instant, an alluring voice tickled her ears, dragging her consciousness into darkness.

Her consciousness fell, like she was falling through the sky, as if she was sinking into deep water.

She didn't know what had happened. She didn't know what might happen next.

But her thoughts leaped to her grandson's future, to her son's heart, and to the woman who connected those two.

And finally—

"—Wilhelm."

She called the name of the man she loved so much as her consciousness disappeared entirely.

Then—

12

“You look terrible…”

Slowly opening her eyes, she saw a disheveled face.

His hair was completely white, and the number of wrinkles on his face had grown, but she couldn’t help thinking how handsome he looked. There was still no mistaking it.

This face belonged to her husband. Though, it looked like quite a long time had passed since they last parted ways.

“

man Wilhelm Trias was.

That was why he had what it took to become her husband, Wilhelm van Astrea.

“I have something…I have to tell you.”

“

I was helped by so many people, and I met you, Wilhelm.

There will surely still be plenty of problems.

But I believe that all of you will be okay.

Because I love all of you. From the very start to the very end, I always loved you.

I only have one last regret—a question I didn't get to ask.

How surprised would you be if I told you that I fell for you from the moment we first laid eyes on each other?

13

After sharing one last moment together, it was time.

She smiled as if satisfied, her cheeks flushed adorably as tears welled in her eyes. Then Theresia van Astrea's form crumbled in the blink of an eye.

Theresia turned into ash in Wilhelm's arms, and this time, she was truly gone.

"

to an opponent for his son. And that fact only made Heinkel gnash his teeth all the more.

“Don’t get cocky, Reinhard…!” Heinkel let out a spit-flecked roar as he denounced his son. “Nothing you say can change what I saw. The fact that you cut Mom…you cut Theresia van Astrea down. I’ll testify. I’ll make sure everyone knows. No one will acknowledge you as the Sword Saint!”

“

longsword had pierced his thigh.

The blessing of the grim reaper, which would have kept it from closing, had lost its effect the moment Theresia's presence disappeared. The old scratch on his left shoulder was the same.

The left shoulder had been marked by Theresia while she was alive, and the right leg had been marked while she was dead. Both wounds engraved with his wife's blessing lost their effect.

"What do you mean 'stop,' Dad…?! Are you really fine with this?! He—"

"Stop it, Heinkel… Just…stop it…"

Wilhelm once again asked Heinkel to put an end to it.

Spreading out the rest of his coat, Wilhelm wrapped up the ashes that were Theresia's corpse. It was unbearable for him to leave her there to be carried away by the wind.

At the very least, he wanted to bring her ashes back to be buried with the family she loved so much.

"—Ngh."

Seeing his father like that, Heinkel bitterly bit his tongue. And once Wilhelm had finished gathering the ashes, he stood up on wobbly legs.

The bleeding had stopped, but the wound in his leg was deep. He had lost a lot of blood. Reinhard immediately reached out his arm to support him. But—

"Do not touch me!"

Wilhelm roared just before Reinhard's fingers reached him.

Reinhard stopped, but Wilhelm made no effort to look at him. Their eyes did not meet as the Sword Devil quietly exhaled.

"Reinhard…"

"—Yes, sir."

Unlike Wilhelm's trembling voice, Reinhard's was dignified and unmoved.

Closing his eyes for a moment at that realization, Wilhelm continued:

"Do you regret cutting Theresia…your grandmother?"

"

“…Yes…of course.”
“

unable to walk beside him.

And when he finally lost sight of Wilhelm, Heinkel—

"Wh…why…why, why, why, why?!"

All alone, Heinkel glared at the pavement as he vented his rage. Grabbing his head, he let out a cry that did not even form words and kicked his own sword, which had fallen near his feet.

The beautiful knight's sword, Astrea, bounced across the ground, almost skipping like a rock over water.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it! You can all just croak for all I care! Curse every last one of you!"

Heinkel's bloody scream echoed in the plaza where he had been left all alone.

He screamed and screamed, and his resentful, grieving shout reached high and far—

And thus concluded the battlefield where grandfather, father, and son—the whole Astrea family—had gathered.

The woman who was grandmother, mother, and wife was gone.

Theresia van Astrea's final moment left scars on all three of their hearts.

And with that, the final battle fought in the defense of Pristella reached its conclusion.

CHAPTER 6

THE RESULTS OF THE BATTLE FOR PRISTELLA

1

The broadcast echoed across the entire city while Subaru and Emilia were guiding Regulus's ex-wives to the municipal building that had been their base.

"All four control towers have been recovered, and the foul cultists who held the city hostage have been defeated! The city is safe once again — Pristella is victorious!"

A joyous voice echoed across the entire city through the metia broadcast.

There was no problem beyond the broadcaster's voice cracking a bit and a slightly unstable signal. There was no sense that the person was being forced to say it.

"Subaru! That was…!"

"Yeah. Sounds like things managed to turn out okay…"

Nodding at Emilia's growing excitement, Subaru let some of the tension drain from his shoulders.

At the very least, they had dodged the bad end where the flood gates opened and the whole city was drowned. The only small worry that was currently occupying his mind was that he recognized who was speaking on the broadcast, and if he was not mistaken, it was the voice of Kiritaka Muse, who had been missing.

It was his voice that gave the daily broadcast telling the people of the city to seek shelter in the event of emergencies, so it was a familiar voice to them and would reach their hearts without any problem.

But it wasn't out of the question for someone as vicious as Lust to take advantage of that in some nefarious plan.

"There'll be no end to it if I open that can of worms, though. Either way, we should hurry back. I won't be able to relax until I see it with my own eyes."

He urged Emilia and the rest of the women to speed up. It pained him to push them any further after all they had been through, but they couldn't afford to stop yet. He wanted to clear the unease lurking in the back of his mind as fast as possible and earn a real moment of relief.

Of course, the concern plaguing his heart would not be so easily resolved—

"

very core of their being.

As he listened, the tension that had plagued Subaru's heart soon faded, and he let out a long, deep sigh.

Standing next to him, Emilia gently rested her hand on his.

Regulus's ex-wives, whose emotions had been locked in stasis for so long, were gradually beginning to cry.

The voice of the diva brought a return to the tears that had flowed when they were released from the ice.

They were not the only ones whose emotions erupted, though. It touched everyone in the crowd. Tears and sobs quickly spread as the people were swallowed up in the emotions evoked by the music.

It was a kind, gentle trespass in their hearts.

As the song neared its end, the chords of the lyulyre grew sweeter. Subaru and the rest of the crowd felt the urge to let it continue longer, to resist the ending—

But there was an end to all things. That was why people loved fragile, fleeting things.

Because—

“

round eyes.

"Mm, it looks like neither of you sustained particularly bad wounds. Betty was worried when you took so long to return. If you had been badly hurt while Betty wasn't around, you wouldn't be able to go to the restroom without a guardian for quite some time."

"What am I, in kindergarten? And speaking of, what about you, Beako? Weren't you supposed to be out of commission from using up all your mana?"

"That sounds problematically close to criticism! It's thanks to Betty's efforts that you still have your leg! Betty senses a distinct lack of requisite gratitude and *carrying*!"

"I got it, I got it."

Subaru picked Beatrice up as she puffed out her cheeks in anger, and then he rubbed his cheek against hers. And just like that, Beatrice's mood gradually recovered.

"It looks like you were hard at work while I was gone. Sorry for making so much trouble for you all the time."

"It's only natural for you to cause Betty problems, so there's no problem…is what I would say, but that is a lie. Betty does mind it a bit. So be grateful."

Accepting Subaru's apology, Beatrice demonstrated her benevolence while also giving him an endearing warning. Then she turned to Emilia.

"It is a relief to see you are safe as well, Emilia. Puckie would be sad if anything were to happen to you."

"Mm-hmm. Thank you for worrying about me, too, Beatrice. I'm fine thanks to Subaru and Reinhard coming to help me."

Beatrice turned away with a huff when Emilia flexed her biceps to show she was all right. The spirit's cheeks were just a little bit red, though. *It's adorable how she tries and fails to pretend she isn't embarrassed.*

"Anyway, a question for my adorable Beako: If Liliana's performing here, that means we must've scored a big win…so where's everyone? The building was evacuated before you tore it down, right?"

"Eh? You broke it, Beatrice? I wonder if we can cover the costs with our allowances…"

"What do you think you're saying?! Betty didn't do this! It ended up like this on its own after Betty left!"

"Kidding, I'm kidding."

Subaru laughed at Beatrice's reaction as Emilia looked back and forth between them in confusion. But if Beatrice was going along with such a silly conversation, then—

"Everyone must be doing well if you're this relaxed…"

"—Yeah, yeah. Eeeeveryone was moved out first, so don't go gettin' worked up."

"Whoa now, that voice is… Huh?"

The three of them turned to see who had confirmed Subaru's suspicions.

There was a small figure who was avoiding the large crowd and mountain of rubble—for a second, there was a little confusion, though, because her hair was a different color from what they remembered.

"Anastasia…right?"

"Why the surprise…? Oh yeah, my hair's a little different, right."

Anastasia, who was wearing a kimono, ran a comb through her hair. Her light-purple hair had been dyed a dramatic green, and Emilia's eyes shot open at the impact of such a major change.

"What happened to your hair?"

"Hmm, does it not suit me? I kinda like it…"

"Ah, no, it suits you! But it was so sudden; I was just surprised, is all…"

Emilia frantically shook her head while earnestly answering Anastasia's question.

"Well, aren't you sweet?" Anastasia smiled at that response. "It's a biiit of a long story, but this was part of our plan. We can save the catching-up for later, though… For now, I'm glad you're safe, Emilia. And you're a right, proper man, aren't you, Natsuki?"

"I'm a bit worried about that evaluation…but that aside, can you tell me if everyone else is okay, Anastasia?"

"

Part of it was just a natural aversion to dying, but a big reason was the worlds after his death that he'd seen in the Sanctuary. He had no way to know if they were real or not. They could have been just the cruel manipulations of a nasty Witch— Either way, though, he could not bring himself to just rely on his ability after that.

But if there was a time when he might choose to die and go back of his own volition, it would be because of a result that he considered unacceptable.

And this time, Subaru had steeled himself for that possibility.

The royal candidates, knights, and everyone else who had joined forces in order to challenge the Archbishops and retake the city—he had made up his mind to endure that pain and suffering as many times as he had to in order to avoid losing them.

"Subaru…"

Emilia and Beatrice grew anxious when they noticed his dangerous determination.

Glimpsing the frightening resolution in Subaru's eyes, Anastasia softened her expression.

"…You can take it easy. You and Emilia were the last ones to make it back."

"We were last…meaning everyone else is…?"

"Don't worry."

Subaru was dying for confirmation as Anastasia's smile deepened and she gave him a wink.

"Eeeveryone made it back—we won without losing anyone."

3

"General! You're safe!"

The shelter closest to the wreckage of the government building had turned into a field hospital overflowing with patients.

Wanting to see everyone, Beatrice had directed them there. The first one to notice them was a blond boy who called out in a booming voice.

"Oh, Garfiel… Wait, are you okay?!"

Seeing Garfiel wave at them with a smile, Subaru opened his eyes wide in shock.

Garfiel was topless, but his skin was black and blue all over from horrific bruises. But his face was clear and untroubled, brimming with self-confidence after overcoming a terrible battle.

When Subaru saw that expression, the shock on his face quickly turned into a smile.

"Are you really in a position to be asking about other people's safety? You look terrible."

"I don't wanna hear that from you… But that's the general for ya. Looks like you proved yourself a real man. Good job savin' Lady Emilia."

"Damn straight."

Subaru flashed an audacious grin as he held out his fist and Garfiel met it with his own. That was all they needed as two men praising each other for a battle well fought.

Seeing their exchange, Emilia and Beatrice glanced at each other.

"It sort of feels like Subaru and Garfiel are acting *really* boyish."

"Dear me, that's a world Betty cannot begin to understand. It is far too heated for Betty's tastes."

Emilia smiled, while Beatrice was entirely uninterested. Garfiel's eyes took on a keen edge as his fangs clinked together at her reaction.

"Heh, it might be something you girls wouldn't get. After all, I __"

"Ohhh! Garf! Dun-da-da-dun!"

"Gah?!"

Before he could finish talking, Garfiel was sent flying by a sudden unexpected blow. A little cat-girl with her tail wagging was sitting on his chest. Her ears were standing up, and an adorable smile was plastered over her face.

"Ha-ha-ha! Don't let your guard down, Garf! The true enemy is in your heart! Also, important people are in your heart, too! In other words, your heart is full!"

"Don't just start sittin' on top of people like that…"

"Ha-ha-ha, the lady told Mimi! Something about showing a boy who's on top? She said it was a kind of tactic! So I decided to try it!"

Mimi laughed as she sat on Garfiel.

Mimi had been badly wounded, so seeing her healthy was a relief for Subaru.

"Looks like you're doing okay now, too, Mimi!"

"Oh, hey! Welcome back, mister! Apparently, things were pretty crazy while Mimi was sleeping! Thanks! Mimi slept suuuper well!

And now Mimi's fine!"

"Still the same even after all that, huh… But I'm sure that's a relief for Garfiel, too."

Subaru had heard that Mimi had been grievously injured while protecting Garfiel.

He had carried her to safety, and he had been badly shaken when he found out her wound could not be healed. So it must have been a relief to have her back to her free-spirited self.

“Ha. It’s kinda concernin’ that she’s so unchanged. I told you before, didn’t I?! Don’t go makin’ a fuss right after gettin’ healed…”

Garfiel glared at Mimi, who was grinning atop his chest. He was trying to lecture her, but before he could finish, Mimi’s eyes went wide.

“Uh-oh! Garf! The wound opened again! It’s bleeding!”

“Dumbass! That’s what I told you! Damn it! Let’s get you to a healer!”

“Gaaah! It hurts! It hurts!”

Carrying Mimi, Garfiel frantically ran farther into the shelter. Subaru could not help being taken aback by the uproarious whirlwind of events.

“Hee-hee…from the looks of it, Garfiel doesn’t have time to worry.”

Emilia commented with a smile as she watched the two of them disappear.

“Yeah.” Subaru grinned. “They make a pretty good pair.”

“Mimi’s cute, and it looks like she *really* likes Garfiel… Garfiel seems to like Ram, though, so it probably won’t be that simple, either.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean… Wait, since when did you start noticing relationships like that?!”

It was a pretty obvious example, but still, the unexpected comment caught Subaru by surprise.

Emilia had put her response to Subaru’s confession on hold because she didn’t really understand those kinds of relationships, but here she was, talking about other people’s love lives.

“Well now, how cute it is to see the children growing up.”

“It must be embarrassing to be told that by the one who looks the most like a little kid here.”

Beatrice shrugged, at ease watching the two of them from a distance. It was a response that did not quite match her appearance, and the one who reacted to it was—

“Oh, you were here, too, Otto?”

“I’ve been here all along! Also, all of you gathered where I was to begin with!”

—the very same Otto who overreacted to Subaru’s comment.

As he implied, he had been there the whole time, even before

Subaru and Garfiel fist-bumped. After all, everyone had met up in front of the bed where he was recovering.

"Beako told me all about it, Mr. Wartime Planner. I heard how you were out prowling the city in search of prey. You've really taken a liking to that sort of thing, haven't you?"

"Please spare me the utterly unfounded stories before you start another baseless rumor!"

Otto shouted in his usual tone, but his face was pallid, and he did not look like he was in good shape. Both of his legs were tightly bandaged. There was no mistaking he had been badly wounded.

"How are you holding up, Otto?"

"Walking will probably be difficult for a short time, but it seems they should properly heal… It's a bit pathetic that I was so terribly hurt when you were surely in the more dangerous situation."

"It's not pathetic at all. It happened because you were fighting so hard, right? Fighting isn't even your job. I'm glad at least it wasn't any worse than this for you."

"You're still the only one who has a common-sense understanding of what being an adviser means, Lady Emilia…"

Otto must have been badly starving for any kind of sincere concern, though the emotion in his response left Emilia a little unsure of how to react. But his previous visitor Garfiel's reaction had probably been basically the same as Subaru's, so it was easy enough to guess how he must have been feeling.

Still though, Subaru was not exactly unconcerned about how Otto got those wounds.

"—I heard you ran into that Gluttony freak while getting the book?"

Subaru's voice was wooden as he mentioned what he had heard from Beatrice.

Otto had gone out of his way to separate Subaru and the rest from anything to do with the Tome of Wisdom. He could understand Otto's worries, but he had the same sort of concerns, too.

"You should have said something at least. We're friends, aren't we?"

"I should have added one more dangerous burden to the load when Lady Emilia had already been abducted and with you having to bear the fate of the city like some fairy-tale hero? No, thank you. I have no intention of pushing all my problems onto my friends'

shoulders like that."

"Ha."

He had tried to feign some lighthearted banter, but Subaru barked a short laugh before looking away in exasperation at that unexpected response.

"You two just can't be honest with each other, can you…? I suppose this is another thing that only men would understand?"

"But I do think it's just like them."

Emilia giggled with her hand over her mouth while Beatrice shrugged.

Seeing that, Subaru glanced over at Otto—and Otto nodded slightly.

Subaru did not really want to let Emilia hear about the Tome of Wisdom, and it looked like Otto shared his thoughts on the matter, so they silently agreed to drop the subject for the moment.

The tome was a strictly better version of the Witch Cult's Gospels, a shady book left behind by a certain Witch. Not letting Emilia get involved with any of that if at all possible was one of the silent, steadfast resolutions Subaru had made for himself.

"Either way, the important thing is that you're fine. You've got the tenacity of a weed."

"I'd like to register a complaint if you believe 'fine' is an adequate description given what happened to my legs…"

Subaru said it half out of concern and half out of a desire to change the topic. Otto's words petered off partway through, though.

It looked like he had another concern aside from his legs and the tome.

"What is it? Something else you need to get off your chest?"

"Yes, a rather difficult problem in fact—Mr. Natsuki, please be careful around the neighboring shelter."

"The neighboring shelter…?"

Subaru cocked his head, and Emilia and Beatrice had the same reaction. Looking up at them, Otto nodded sharply.

"There is an Archbishop tied up there."

4

"—Yo. So it was you, Bro. I was wondering who was coming here."

On their way to the problematic shelter, they were greeted in the passage by a man in an iron helm leaning against the wall—

Priscilla's retainer, Al.

He turned his gaze to Emilia.

"Oh? Looks like you made it out safely after all, young lady. Seriously, good job out there, Bro."

"Yes, thank you for worrying about me. You passing my message onto Subaru and everyone was a *really* big help, too. Thank you, Al. You're a good person."

Al had been a messenger bearing crucial information that Emilia had gathered after getting abducted by Regulus. Al scratched his neck bashfully at being thanked so directly.

"…I'm gonna break out in a rash. You're exaggerating. Tell her for me, Bro."

"Yeah, you're exaggerating, Emilia-tan."

"You're really gonna say that, Bro?! After all the work I did?!"

"Sorry, sorry, just kidding."

Though, Subaru definitely had a few bones to pick about what Al had done during the mess that had happened. There were a lot of shady activities going on, and then there was his advice to Subaru—a lot of questions were still hanging in the air.

"What are you doing here, Al?"

"I'm playin' lookout. More like a scarecrow, though. The princess said it would be bad if no one was watchin'. And then she went off to change clothes."

"…But you don't look like you mind that much, Al."

Al groaned like he had been hit below the belt by Emilia's innocent comment.

In truth, if he was willingly serving someone like Priscilla who led everyone around by the nose, then he had his own sense of fealty. And that was not something that others could easily weigh and measure.

"Man, that really throws me off… It's probably a safe bet to assume she's the reason why you came here, right?"

"What other reason might there be? We aren't so unoccupied that we would come all this way just to chat with you."

"That's a harsh way to put it. No need to get so annoyed, Beako… Gah."

"…Subaru is the only one allowed to call Betty that."

There was a flicker of anger in Beatrice's eyes at Al's flippant attitude.

"Say it again, and the most fearsome retribution imaginable will

await you."

"Fine, fine, got it. Sheesh, so cold."

Al grumbled as he fiddled with his helmet. But it was definitely unlike Beatrice to snap so much.

But before Subaru could comment on it, Al cleared the way for them.

"The Archbishop is inside. She's tied up so she can't do anything, so there shouldn't be any need to be at each other's throats— I should warn you, though."

"What?"

"Nothin' good'll come of getting mixed up with these cultists. You should just turn back and leave without talkin' to her."

"…Like I can afford to do that."

Al's voice dropped and took on a more earnest tone, but Subaru shook his head before stepping forward.

The air was electric, and he felt the goose bumps rising on his skin—the Archbishop was just behind the last metal door.

"Not after everything she's done. Besides, no matter how much I hate it, we're gonna have to deal with the cultists whether we like it or not, so might as well take the reins for once."

"…I see. If your mind's made up, then say no more."

Getting the measure of Subaru's resolve, Al relented. He just nodded toward the metal door behind him.

"Just to check, but are you two going, too?"

"Mm-hmm. Of course. I can't let Subaru do something dangerous all by himself."

"Gotcha… That's a lot more reassuring than Bro goin' by himself."

"Who asked you?! And if something does happen, feel free to come help, too, jerk!"

With that last bit of banter, they went through the passage while Al watched. The closer they got to the tightly closed metal door, the more the incomprehensible, overawing aura twisted around their bodies.

It was almost as if Subaru's instinct, his very soul, was rejecting the being on the other side of the door.

"…Subaru…"

Emilia was worried when Subaru stopped and stared at the door.

Beatrice was silent, but she took Subaru's empty hand.

“Sorry, I’m fine— Let’s go.”

Taking heart from having the two of them with him, Subaru shook off the feeling and tightly gripped the doorknob.

The door opened with a *creak*—

“Aha, so you came. I apologize for dragging you out here. And thank you.”

The monster tied up in chains to a chair in the middle of the dimly lit room—the Archbishop of Wrath, Sirius Romanée-Conti—greeted Subaru with a smile.

“

anyone to deny me. Not even that arrogant girl."

Obliquely referencing Priscilla, whom she had fought earlier, Sirius looked at Subaru with loving eyes. Subaru struggled to find the right words to respond—

"—Subaru, this is a waste of time. Expecting reflection or empathy or any sort of human emotion from the likes of them is just a waste of time. This is simply the type of creature they are."

"Stay away from my beloved Petelgeuse, you spirit clad in the form of a woman."

Sirius's anger swelled at Beatrice, who was right next to Subaru. Drawing the Archbishop's prickly ire, Beatrice grabbed tightly onto Subaru's arm.

"How unfortunate, as Betty is Subaru's spirit and is here at his request. On the other hand, you should stop addressing Subaru by the wrong name."

"Don't get ahead of yourself, brat. Don't cling to that man with your filthy, one-sided emotions. Shall I send a pillar of fire up your ass to scorch your insides and burn out your Odo Ragna?"

"Both of you, calm down. Don't go picking fights, or I'll get mad, too."

Emilia broke in as a dangerous mood crackled between Beatrice and Sirius.

It seemed like everyone had suddenly gotten amped up all at once. Perhaps it was because of Sirius's power? The danger of her monstrous ability to disrupt emotions and warp minds only grew the longer people were exposed to it.

"Subaru, I think it really is too dangerous to talk with her…"

"—Even so, I'm begging you. It's not every day that a cultist drops into our laps like this. We should take advantage of the chance to question her while we can."

They might never get another opportunity to interrogate a cultist. And this was not just some random cultist, either, but an Archbishop— They might be able to glean something about the other Archbishops' powers.

"…I'm going to intervene the moment I think it's getting dangerous…"

Emilia accepted Subaru's request and took one step back from Subaru with Beatrice.

With that, Subaru looked back again at the monster who was bound hand and foot to the chair.

“Just like you wanted, I’m the one talking to you now. I should warn you in advance: All the other cultists are either dead or long gone, so no one is coming to save you.”

“I never expected any help. You are really adorable saying something so obvious to hide your embarrassment.”

Despite her restraints, Sirius was rapturous now that Subaru was finally talking with her.

She had apparently chosen not to acknowledge that Emilia and Beatrice were there anymore. Deciding that this was good enough, since it meant the two of them were not in danger, Subaru attempted to pry information out of her.

“What do you mean it’s obvious that no help would come? The reason we won is because you don’t have any sense of teamwork, but there has to be some limit to that, right?”

The successful defense of Pristella had been predicated on the fact that the Archbishops were not working together, and it was, effectively speaking, the reason why they had won. But there was still something about it that did not make sense.

“You and the other Archbishops attacked Pristella at the same time. That makes it seem an awful lot like you guys were working together, no? And the demands for the Tome of Wisdom or the artificial spirit or what have you…”

“It was not I who wanted those things, and I’ve no desire to understand the foul thoughts of the others. The reason we all gathered in the city is because our Gospels guided us to do so.”

“…The Gospels again?”

Everyone in this world believed that the Gospels were what led cultists astray and turned them onto the path of evil.

The story went that they were prophecies that led their owner toward the future they should tread, but they were not omnipotent tomes, either, judging by Petelgeuse’s fate.

Subaru understood better than anyone that knowing the future was not everything. So the Gospels being incomplete was not shocking to him. However—

“Why are you cultists doing what those books tell you? Because they’ll help you revive the Witch…your beloved Witch of Jealousy?”

“—Please do not misunderstand.”

“Misunderstand what?”

“You are the only one I love. You and you alone. I don’t care

one way or the other about the Witch. Everything I do is whatever's necessary to arrive at *you*."

To Subaru's surprise, her delight dissipated at his question. A deep, dark brew of negative emotions, obsession, and delusion that had been stewing for ages swelled in its place—

"The others are similar. They are all just clinging to their powers in the grips of one abhorrent desire or another. They are different from you and I, whose goal is simply love— They are different in every way."

—The Witch Cult's goal was supposed to be the revival of the Witch of Jealousy.

Subaru had never had reason to doubt that belief given Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti's actions and speech and what he had heard of the cult's rituals and atrocities. But her statement shook that fundamental assumption.

"What are the other Archbishops' goals? What is the cult's endgame?"

"Who knows? Sorry, but I have no interest in anything other than you, so I don't have an answer."

"Is there a base the cult operates out of? There must be someone who's a leader or director or something!"

"No, there is not really anything like that, as you well know."

Hiding her fiendish smile behind the bandages, Sirius answered Subaru's questions evasively.

She wasn't trying to dodge the questions. It was probably the truth. She twisted the entire world around her for the sake of her obsession without thinking or knowing anything about anyone else.

That sort of singular focus was why they had become Archbishops.

"

“Having your spirit subsumed by the body you intended for your possession and losing your freedom… You really are hopeless without me.”

There was a heavy heat in Sirius’s voice as she sweetly ran her tongue over Subaru’s neck.

Goose bumps covered his body at the coarse, alien feeling running across his skin. His vision turned red as he felt bile rising in his throat. His thoughts were engulfed in a wave of heat—

“—Icebrand Arts!”

“Gah, hbngh!”

An ice hammer struck Sirius in the side and knocked her into the wall, chair and all.

“Don’t do anything weird! I’m not the most precise at this sort of stuff, so I can’t hold back very well!”

Emilia issued Sirius a warning after unleashing a merciless blow.

Meanwhile, Beatrice supported Subaru as he wobbled, her eyes carefully watching the Archbishop.

And this is what happened even when we never let down our guard at all. Sirius is entirely bound and cornered, but even so, she can’t be contained. Just more confirmation of how dangerous she is.

It tended to get lost in the fiendishness of her power, but Sirius’s combat abilities were top-tier even among the Archbishops.

At first glance, Regulus might have seemed like the strongest of the cultists with his invincibility, but in actuality, Greed was the least threatening of all because of his pure reliance on his power. When it came to strength that was not dependent on their Authorities, the other Archbishops were far more challenging than Regulus.

“Talking with her any more is just a waste of our time, Subaru. This woman is nothing more than a risk.”

This time, Subaru could not shrug off Beatrice’s warning.

The dangers outweighed the returns. Sirius’s power was too optimized for screwing with people’s minds.

It was a shame, but the risk was too great to interact with her anymore.

“

“Liliana…?!”

The simple statement that songs were a wonderful thing would not get an objection from him. But that did not mean any song could earn a compliment. And Sirius’s fundamental feelings about music were far, far different from Liliana’s.

The diva was gently saving the people who had gathered after cautiously emerging from the shelters, bringing their hearts together in joy. That beautiful, precious song and Sirius’s twisted, hair-raising sounds were not the same.

“Don’t compare your music to hers. Whatever you’re doing, it’s something entirely different.”

“—I could say the same of you. *You* are different. Different on a fundamental level from the man I love. The same…and yet different.”

“What?”

“Petelgeuse is inside you. Soul and soul blend. Body and body merge. It will take time before that lovely man reaches the surface. What I should do is help that process along. To watch and wait close at hand for the moment he awakens.”

Still lying on the floor, Sirius twisted her neck to look up at Sirius.

There was a madness in her eyes, a raging storm of emotions. Anger, joy, sadness, and an impossible-to-hide yearning were all swirling there.

“I will drag him out from you— Thank you, and sorry. Please take care of your body and heart until that day comes.”

There was a genuine and attentive affection for Subaru in her words.

Sirius understood that he and Petelgeuse were different. But even understanding that, she was overwriting reality with a convenient delusion.

Swearing to be there to greet Petelgeuse, who was sleeping inside Subaru.

“A word of warning— Beware of Gluttony. Gourmet, Garbage, and even Gorging will surely try to steal you away.”

“…Gluttony?”

“If you are eaten by them, no one will remember you. I would hate for that to happen. If you have the opportunity, please do kill Gluttony. They’re a nuisance.”

Still lying on the ground, she saw Subaru off with a smile

twisted by tormented love.

To the very end, there was not a trace of mutual understanding or compatibility.

It was etched into his heart by that point that this was just how Archbishops were, though.

“

best you can hope for. You might just be on the same wavelength as them, Bro."

"Don't say something like that… I'm content to be on the same wavelength as Beako. Ain't that right?"

Shaking his head at Al's terrifying comment, Subaru patted Beatrice's head. Naturally, he was expecting a spirited response from her, but—

"Beako?"

"…Subaru, we've done enough here. Let's go."

—Beatrice tugged at his sleeve with a wooden look on her face. Subaru was suspicious of that response, but he nodded.

"Then let's head back and meet up with everyone else. What are you going to do, Al?"

"I'll pass. Someone's gotta watch the Archbishop, right? Not like anything revolutionary is gonna come from me being part of the conversation, so I'll stick with my faithful-servant shtick."

Al sat down in a relaxed, cross-legged position. Looking at him, Emilia clenched her fists in front of her.

"In that case, be careful, Al. It's a *reeeally* important job, so thank you for taking care of it."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll do my best— I'm glad you made it out okay, missy."

With that last exchange, they left Al to watch Sirius's jail.

Once they left the passage and could no longer see Al—

"So what was that about, Beako? It looks like you really hate Al."

"…It's not really anything of the sort. Just your misunderstanding, I suppose."

"No, you're not going to get away with just that. I'm not Emilia-tan."

"Huh? What does that mean?"

Still holding his hand, Beatrice looked away, feigning ignorance while Emilia cocked her head at Subaru's follow-up.

"Did something happen between you and Al? …Did he have something to do with you waking up?"

"…Always at the worst moments. A perceptive girl really is a dangerous thing."

"Which means she's right? Did Al do something that helped you get moving again, Beako?"

With a bitter expression on her face, Beatrice was forced to nod

at their question. Then she felt around in her cloak and pulled something out to show them.

"That's…"

"The crystals that we came here to find—he brought them."

She held a special, faintly glimmering crystal atop her small hand—the very thing that was the reason why they had come to Pristella in the first place.

It was supposed to be the property of Kiritaka Muse and stored at his company, but with the building destroyed, it was going to be difficult to recover it.

"But Al dug them up instead? How?"

"—Betty doesn't know. And was told not to ask as well."

"Told? By Al? He said not to ask him about it with a pretty please on top?"

"I doubt it was that cute of an ask… He's getting harder and harder to understand."

Emilia's thoughts were fairly positive, but Subaru's doubts were focused on how inscrutable Al's actions had been throughout everything that had happened— Honestly, Al's actions behind the scenes in Pristella had gone too far.

I'm going to have to be on guard around him if the shady stuff keeps up—

"But I don't think Al is a bad person."

With a finger on her lip, Emilia shattered the tension that Subaru and Beatrice were feeling. Beatrice gurgled in frustration.

"Saying something like that without any evidence is too much. There's no denying the fact that he woke Betty up with a crystal and has done all sorts of suspicious things…"

"But thanks to that, you were able to wake up, and Otto and Felt were saved, right? And he even found the crystals that we absolutely needed."

"Mghhh. I suppose."

Beatrice's response dropped off, overwhelmed by Emilia's unshakable belief in people's fundamental goodness. And in truth, her theory was persuasive in its own way.

Al's actions were undeniably shady. But Subaru could not sense any hostility toward them, either.

In fact, his choices had worked in their favor throughout. There was no doubt that he was one of the key people who had contributed a great deal in the battle for Pristella.

“We have to confirm with Kiritaka about this crystal later. Then we can discuss negotiations again and get him to trade it to us.”

“…Even though he would never know if we just took it.”

Beatrice muttered at Emilia’s line of thought but did not voice a strong objection. In that sense, they were both fundamentally good, trusting people. It was a heartwarming sort of scene.

Either way, though, they put dealing with Al on hold and decided to negotiate directly with Kiritaka regarding the crystals. With that settled, they returned to the shelter.

Subaru reprioritized confirming the safety of all their comrades, which had been his original goal.

“

was the coat at his side that seemed to be wrapped around something.

"Wilhelm, is that…?"

He could not help himself trying to confirm what was being so preciously kept in that neatly folded coat.

Wilhelm turned his gaze to the coat. He was silent. Five, and then ten seconds passed.

"…As you surmised, it is my wife."

"—Ah."

It was the expected response, but Subaru was still at a loss for words.

Averting his eyes, Wilhelm continued in a hoarse voice.

"The corpse became ash. I felt it too pitiful to simply leave it exposed to the wind like that. It is shameful, but I wrapped the ashes in my coat and brought them back… Even if it is only ashes, I wanted to lay her to rest in her family's grave and have a proper memorial for her."

The corpse had been animated in violation of the natural order. The cruelty of that fate had to be difficult to bear. Considering the feelings of those she left behind, considering Wilhelm's feelings, Subaru could not begin to imagine how terrible that blow must have been.

"Apologies. It is a terribly meaningless and temperamental fixation."

"—Wha?! That's not true at all!"

Subaru suddenly raised his voice when he heard the self-reproach in Wilhelm's voice. He could feel himself getting heated as he looked straight at Wilhelm, who was slightly taken aback by the impassioned response.

"I didn't think you were wrong back with the White Whale, and I don't think you're wrong now. I respect you and think you're an amazing person, Wilhelm. There is nothing wrong with caring about the people who are most precious to you. It isn't anything to be ashamed of, and I think shame is the wrong way to think of it."

"Sir Subaru…"

"You are outstanding. There's nothing wrong with wanting to give your wife a proper burial and memorial service. I can't really explain it well, but you're a good person."

That was how Subaru felt from the bottom of his heart.

He had thought it before during the battle with the White

Whale, and again during this sad reunion. Fate had been terribly hard on Wilhelm. But even so, the Sword Devil had resisted fate, persisting in his love until he finally achieved what he set out to do.

It was true that not everything had turned out wonderfully. He would probably be plagued by feelings of regret and remorse for the rest of his life. But he had still done the right thing in Subaru's eyes.

Wilhelm had loved his wife with every fiber of his being. Nothing was wrong with that.

"It's not disgraceful at all. Please give her a proper memorial. And if the opportunity arises and it isn't a nuisance, please let me also pay my respects at her grave."

"

hands.

“My wife…”

Wilhelm fell silent for a moment. Looking away slightly, Wilhelm let his gaze fall to the coat holding his wife’s ashes.

For a moment, there was a tremendous swell of emotions swirling in his blue eyes—

“…Yes, I was able to speak with her to my heart’s content and shared a final farewell.”

Subaru was sure he meant that metaphorically.

Wilhelm’s wife was the previous Sword Saint. Crossing blades with her was undoubtedly the ultimate form of conversation to the Sword Devil, and the decisive blow would be the final farewell.

So Wilhelm had no doubt said everything he wanted to say in those last moments.

“I love my wife. I am sure I conveyed that to her.”

Quietly, Wilhelm confessed his love.

There was an intensity in those soft words that made Subaru’s heart burn.

Exhaling deeply, Subaru got a grip over his torrent of emotions and nodded.

Subaru smiled, feeling a sense of relief from seeing Wilhelm like that, a faint smile on his lips.

“Thank you for everything.”

“

return. That was probably just how different his face had looked when he went over versus coming back.

He had already known the truth of it—a reunion with someone who had passed away was not necessarily a happy thing.

But even so, at least Wilhelm had found closure at his own hands and could accept the result.

It was a trivial thing, but he also felt like it could also be a saving grace.

“

Wilhelm was standing. Subaru didn't make the tactless mistake of looking back, but he nodded repeatedly at her statement.

Wilhelm was strong. He was awe-inspiring. As a fellow man, Subaru had nothing but respect for him.

Watching Subaru as he thought that, Emilia put her hand to her lips and giggled.

"When it comes to Wilhelm, you always get *reeeally* serious. It's almost like you're smitten with him."

"You know, no one really says that anymore…"

He played it off like normal, but he understood what Emilia wanted to say. Subaru had noticed it about himself as well.

"He's special. I can honestly respect him. And I'm happy to just do that."

"Mm, I think that's *reeeally* great. I'm sure it is a good thing for him, too."

"Huh? I doubt it…but still, when I get older and turn into an elegant old man, I hope I have the same sort of dignified presence he does."

"Yes, yes, I get it. You don't have to get so bashful about it."

Subaru couldn't say for himself whether that was a joke to hide his embarrassment or not, but either way, it made Emilia smile. And that smile was cute enough to help Subaru set aside the vaguely gloomy feelings hanging over his heart.

Those feelings were the kind that didn't need to be put into words.

"Betty thinks a beard like that wouldn't suit you at all."

"I don't think that was really what we were talking about! But okay, I understand. I'll hold off on a beard until you think it'll look good on me."

"Well, we will just have to wait and see if that time ever comes. Without at least Puckie's level of talent, it might not be possible to maintain both charm and fur. You will have to do your best."

"Aye, aye."

Both Emilia's natural response and Beatrice's concern helped Subaru cheer up. Feeling blessed to have them by his side, Subaru took a long, deep breath and looked ahead.

"

Liliana's performance continued. She was surely driven by her own belief in the power of music to encourage people.

Of course, the city had been struck by a terrible disaster.

Both Liliana's feelings and Subaru's happiness at the scene before him were maybe just their own little efforts at finding a silver lining.

But even so, there was meaning in going through the motions. Both the joy and the grief people felt were real.

The reason for everything they had done was all around them in that moment—

"—Hmm?"

Just as he was thinking that, Subaru noticed a figure peeking in the entrance of the shelter.

Someone who was tall and slender, wearing nice white clothes. There was no mistaking that disgustingly handsome face and that alluringly lustrous purple hair.

Julius. One of the people he had been wanting to check on had shown his face.

"Hey! Jul—"

"—Ngh."

He raised his hand to wave and call out, but as he started to say something, Julius immediately spun and fled the shelter.

"Huh?"

Subaru stared in shock at Julius's unexpected reaction.

Julius had reacted with sarcasm and snide remarks before, but he had never straight up ignored Subaru.

He had not been worried about him, of course. But there was something wrong with that response.

"Subaru? What is it?"

"That jerk Julius just ignored me. Give me a sec, I'm gonna go catch him!"

"Eh?"

There was a bubbling anger in his voice as Subaru left Emilia behind and chased after Julius.

Running through the bustle of the shelter, he gave chase as Julius tried to disappear into the street. It was almost as if he was trying to avoid being seen. What was going on?

"Hey, you asshole! What are you doing hanging back here when everyone's busy?! People'll worry if you don't at least show your face! That's just common sense."

“

“Ummm…you’re busy, I guess?”

She noticed the strange mood and tension; her eyelashes trembled slightly. Judging from her reaction—especially the way she looked at Julius—Subaru had a sinking feeling.

Wanting to reject it, he pointed at Julius.

“…Yeah, sort of, but also not? Emilia-tan, Beako, umm…”

“—?”

Emilia and Beatrice had question marks hanging over their heads at Subaru’s awkward response.

He had to ask the decisive question. The sort that couldn’t be taken back or undone.

Julius had a look of resignation in his eyes as Subaru gazed at him and asked:

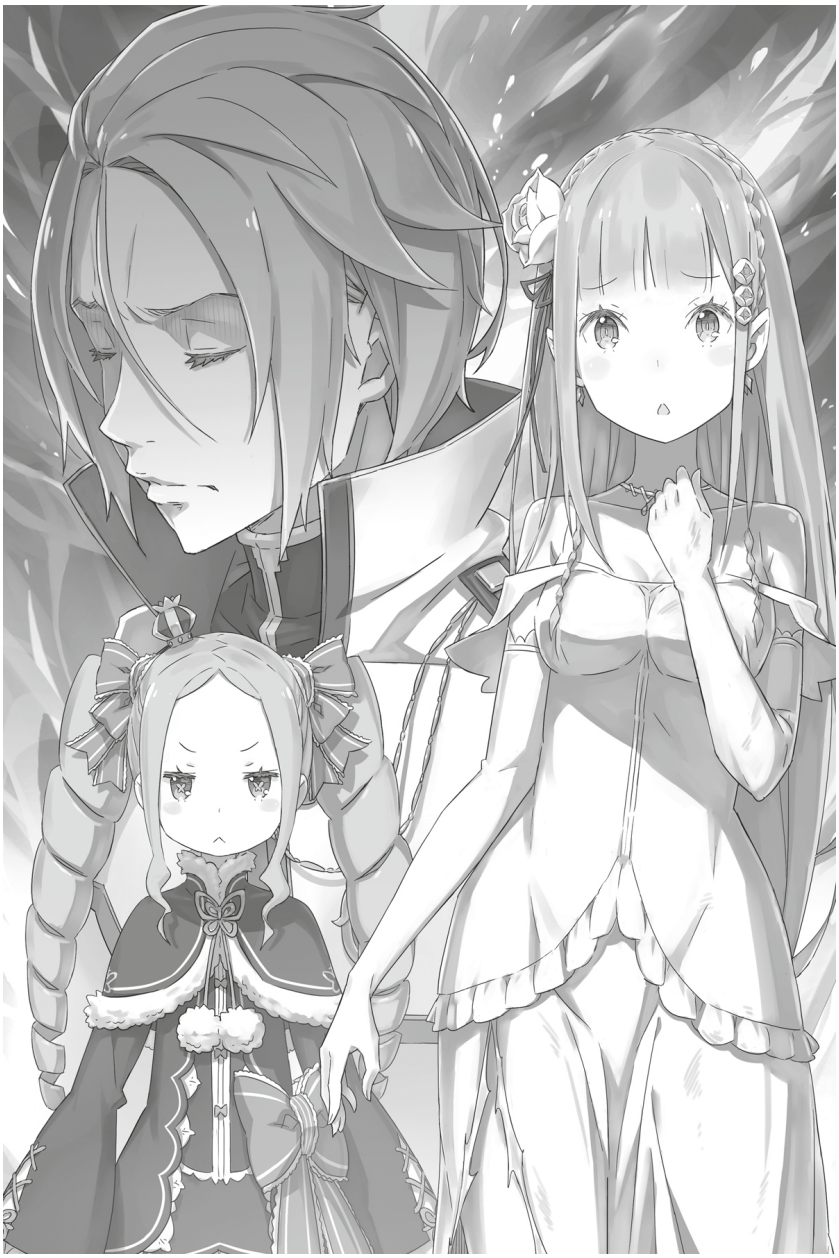
“I found Julius, so you don’t mind if I bring him back to talk, right?”

“—Julius?”

Beatrice looked at Julius. Beside her, Emilia’s beautiful purple eyes were filled with unease—

“Is Julius a friend of yours, Subaru?”

—and Subaru experienced an old nightmare once again.



CHAPTER 7

RIPPLES ON THE SURFACE

1

"First of all, on behalf of the city of Pristella, thank you all for your extraordinary efforts to protect our home. Words cannot express our gratitude."

As the representative of the city's administration, Kiritaka Muse bowed deeply.

Before him stood the royal candidates and their various followers who had participated in the defense of the city. All told, there were fifty-odd people gathered for the after-action report.

Of course, every group had a few empty seats, just like how Otto and Garfiel were absent from Emilia's side, too. But still, most of those involved had gathered.

Amid that illustrious gathering, the first to respond was Subaru.

"The gratitude is greatly appreciated, but you did well to make it out safely, Kiritaka. I heard that you were carried off when Sirius attacked the Muse Company…"

"I was resolved to die there myself. In truth, if the Archbishop had intended to kill me, I would surely have been dead since long ago."

"Sirius didn't intend to kill you?"

Subaru wasn't the only one caught off guard by that. About half of the people in the room looked surprised. Waiting for the wave of murmurs to subside, Kiritaka nodded with a confused look on his face.

"My life itself is proof that she had no intention of killing me. Of course, it was also aided by the spirited fighting of my subordinates and Lady Anastasia's Iron Fangs, but…"

“But that’s not enough to get away from an Archbishop.”

“Indeed.”

Kiritaka lowered his eyes in chagrin at Subaru’s conclusion.

Subaru could understand that feeling of powerlessness painfully well. Self-reproach was like a poison that ate away at the heart.

“But why did Sirius let you live? If that was the case, she could have just not attacked…”

“It’s because he was the last member of the Council of Ten left, right?”

“Eh?”

Liliana, who had been behaving herself for once, answered Emilia’s question. Realizing that she had drawn the attention of the room, Liliana waved her hands awkwardly.

“I mean, if all the members of the council died, then no one would know the location of the Witch’s remnants, right? So they took him because they couldn’t let him die…right, Lady Priscilla?”

“Fool. Do not bring me into this. And it is nothing more than supposition. I could not begin to know the machinations of those who, in addition to their imbecilic tendencies, are possessed of such mad frenzy.”

“Eeeeeh?! You’re going to kick the ladder down now?!”

Priscilla was fanning herself, obviously ignoring Liliana’s gaze as she scanned the room with her crimson eyes before sighing languidly.

“Trying to understand the thoughts of those sorts is a waste of time. If you have time to waste on such meaningless reflection, then just think of a means of extracting the answer from the Archbishop herself.”

“I can’t say I don’t get where you’re coming from…” Anastasia put her hand to her cheek in response to Priscilla’s extreme opinion. “…But if I’m bein’ honest, I’m against keepin’ that Archbishop alive. She’s a scourge… It would be better to finish her off as soon as possible.”

“—But then we won’t have any clues left!”

Ferris reacted vehemently to Anastasia’s proposal. It was a natural objection considering his position and the problems he needed to solve. Crusch was not present at the meeting because she was still suffering from the dragon’s blood curse that Lust had inflicted upon her. Sirius was the only potential clue they had left for how to undo that curse.

“I feel bad for Duchess Karsten, but I can’t imagine any reason why Wrath would know anything about Lust. It’s a fool’s errand.”

“That’s just a guess! Don’t act like it’s a given!”

Ferris raised his voice as he rejected Anastasia’s conclusion. It was just an emotional argument by Ferris, but Anastasia recognized it was a difficult-to-accept proposition, so she did not try to argue it.

“May I?”

As the mood continued to fray, Subaru raised his hand.

“I don’t think trying to learn something from Wrath is necessarily doomed to fail. But I also understand the concern about what might happen if we try to keep her alive.”

“Spare me the balancing act! Whose side are you on, Subaru?!”

“I don’t think this needs to be that heated of a debate. If worse comes to worst, I don’t mind taking every bit of the black mess that’s hurting Lady Crusch if I can just absorb it all.”

“…Hah…”

Ferris was dumbfounded by the extreme proposal of dealing with Crusch’s affliction that Subaru had just suggested. Meanwhile, several other people were looking at Subaru in shock, too…

“Subaru.” Emilia glared at him. “That is absolutely the last resort. You have to take better care of yourself…”

“It’s not like I particularly want a nasty-looking tattoo. But Crusch is a lady and we know that I can at least lessen her pain.”

“

word.

Either way, the tension had slackened a little, but the situation itself had not actually changed.

“We still don’t have any consensus on how we should handle the Archbishop, though—and it’s all thanks to the last person I would have expected to capture a cultist alive strollin’ back with one in tow.”

Anastasia turned her gaze once again to Priscilla. Priscilla paid her no heed, pulling her fan from her bosom and using it to cover her sneering lips.

“You think her life or death is my responsibility? Do not make me laugh, she-fox. It was some plebian searching for the songstress who recovered her from the waterway where I sank her. It was no concern of mine.”

“In that case, why isn’t she already dead?”

“You have gravely misunderstood. I swung my sword with the intention of killing her. However, if she nonetheless failed to die, that means her not dying by my hand is to my benefit, and so I simply refrained from attempting to kill her a second time.”

“…*Haaah*, that juuust barely makes a twisted sort of sense.”

Anastasia gave up trying to argue with Priscilla’s pet theory of how the world worked. Priscilla’s logic was difficult for anyone else to understand. It was doubtful whether even those closest to her like Al or Schult fully understood it.

Meanwhile, there was a difference of opinions within another faction.

“With your permission, I am against executing Wrath. There is, of course, the issue regarding Lady Crusch, but this is also a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the kingdom as well—a chance to interrogate her and learn more about the Witch Cult.”

“…I say just kill her already. Those guys are pieces of shit. I don’t think you can talk to them, and there’s probably nothing lost killing them before they can try anything.”

“Lady Felt…”

“I’ll be clear, this ain’t the usual arguin’ just ’cause I don’t like you tellin’ me what to do.”

Reinhard and Felt were not in agreement on how to handle Wrath. Felt tended to disagree with Reinhard no matter what he said, but this time, it was not simple rebelliousness. Felt’s instincts were telling her not to let Wrath live.

“Nonetheless, custody of the Archbishop should be entrusted to the kingdom. She should be quickly transported to the capital and handed over to the Knights of the Royal Guard.”

“Sure, but that’s pretty darn dangerous, too, right? This is an Archbishop. We have no clue what she might try to pull.”

“If that is your concern, then I will personally escort Wrath to the capital myself. In the unlikely event that the Archbishop attempts something, I should be the best suited for dealing with it.”

“I won’t deny that, but what about Felt? Your camp has some people injured, right? Would the two of you split up, or…?”

“—If Reinhard’s goin’, then I’m goin’, too. There’s no helping it this time.”

It was none other than Reinhard who looked the most surprised by Felt’s statement. He probably expected to be left hanging since he had disagreed with his lady.

Looking up at him, Felt gave him a full-faced frown.

“Don’t get the wrong idea, dumbass. I ain’t agreein’ with you, but I can’t leave you alone like this.”

‘You can’t…leave me alone?”

“If you don’t get it, try asking your heart. ’Cause mine sure ain’t soft enough to answer.”

Thrusting out her relatively underdeveloped chest, Felt stuck out her tongue at Reinhard. Blinking at her reaction, Reinhard ended up nodding nervously.

No one besides the two of them could understand the true meaning behind that exchange, but it looked to Subaru like Felt’s decision was a bit of a relief for Reinhard.

“…Very well. Then what of Lachins, Camberley, and Gaston?”

“Lachins and Gaston are injured, and Camberley’s down in the dumps after getting tricked by your dad, so just have him go back to our place and look after the two of them for now.”

Reinhard nodded respectfully as Felt quickly hammered out the plan for her crew.

“It’s decided, then.” Felt clapped her hands. “Me and Reinhard’ll drag the Archbishop to the capital. No complaints, right, cat-ears? Red lady?”

Ferris reluctantly nodded, and Priscilla leisurely ignored the confirmation, not registering herself as “red lady.”

Either way, having Reinhard oversee the transfer made Sirius a lot less concerning. All that remained to be seen was if a specialist

at the capital could get some more useful information out of that monster.

"As the representative of the city, do you have any objections, Mr. Kiritaka?"

"None. I may be the city's representative, but an Archbishop is beyond my pay grade. If the capital and the royal guard will take her off our hands, then that seems to be the ideal solution."

The matter of Sirius had been settled. And with that, Kiritaka continued:

"However, we still have other troubling issues at hand. The victims of the Witch Cult around the city…"

"The fly-people and the nameless—the victims of Lust and Gluttony."

Anastasia picked up where Kiritaka's melancholic words trailed off. Everyone in the room fell silent.

The flies and the nameless—they were the thorniest issues that had to be dealt with.

For simplicity's sake, all of Lust's victims were being referred to as "flies," but…

"It's not just flies; many have been transformed into other creatures as well. There's too many to list…"

"That terrible woman's handiwork. They've all been transformed in grotesque ways."

There was a hideous reality lying beyond Kiritaka's muddied words.

Every survivor inside the government building had been transformed by Lust's malice. One into a black dragon, dozens into flies. And there was no telling how many more were still out there around the city.

"Ferris, healing magic isn't going to do anything for those who are affected, right?"

"…Yes, that's right. Even I can't heal them. It's not even really a question of healing. They were reconstructed into entirely different creatures. Healing can fix wounds and deal with sickness. But it can't do anything about transformation… Sorry."

Ferris responded apologetically to Reinhard's question, an awful grief filling his eyes.

Just seeing him like that was gut-wrenching. It wasn't just Crusch's condition that was the cause. The events in Pristella had inflicted countless terrible wounds on Ferris's heart.

A sense of powerlessness could easily lead someone into despair. And despair was a fatal affliction.

It was the same for those people who had lost themselves—

"Those transformed into repulsive insects surely wish to die. If there is no plan for returning them to their previous forms, then the merciful decision is to grant them that wish."

"…Priscilla, that's…"

"Silence, commoner. Idealism backed by nothing more than words is of no value at all. What is needed is a plan of action to actually address the situation. If that cannot be provided, then I will grant them mercy by mine own hands."

Priscilla answered Subaru's reflexive response with a fierce gaze and an even fiercer opinion. But for once, he did not have an argument.

As much as it pained him, she was speaking the truth.

Words alone wouldn't change anything. And the person there most earnest about the victims of Lust's power was Priscilla, the person who had the resolve to dirty her own hands for their sake.

So—

"—Please wait. Can you leave this problem to me?"

"Lady Emilia?"

All eyes turned to Emilia, who raised her hand as she interrupted the conversation.

"Ha," Priscilla snorted provocatively as she wrapped her arms under her voluptuous bosom. "Interesting. And what does the likes of a half-demon have to propose? Can your answer satisfy me?"

"I don't know whether it will satisfy you. And I don't have a method that can resolve the problem immediately."

"Hmph, then what will you do? Some of your patented whining? Do you think that can save those people who are at this very moment suffering? Do you think their hearts can endure for as long as you need to find some answer?"

Priscilla firmly stood her ground that it was a problem of time.

How damaging was it to be physically transformed into something strange and alien?

Honestly, Subaru, who had experienced death many times, could still not begin to imagine the fear and despair those people were feeling. But he could understand the logic that the longer they spent like that, the more their spirits would die.

"Therefore, I will grant them mercy before that happens. So

then what is your proposal?”

“—I believe I can buy the time needed to search for a method for them to be restored.”

“What?”

“I can put the people who have been transformed to sleep in ice. I just did it a little while ago, so I believe I can do it for them as well… No, I know I can do it! Please let me take care of this.”

“

“L-Liliana?”

While Subaru was lost in thought, the discussion had kept moving.

Kiritaka was pondering Emilia’s proposition when Liliana slapped him on the back. She strummed her lyulyre rhythmically as she encouraged him.

“If Lady Emilia would go that far, then it is surely a proposal with a chance of success!”

“Of course, I would like to believe in it. But there are many lives riding on this topic. Without any other members of the council, I cannot come to a conclusion so simply…”

“You needn’t worry! Lady Emilia will not fail! And why, you ask?! Because the great people whose names are destined to be left in history are those who overcome these very sorts of challenges! What obstacles?! This is how the tales that thrill and enchant everyone are made!”

The room was filled with music as the story-obsessed Liliana puffed her flat chest out with all her might.

It was truly nothing but baseless idealism, but there was an odd sort of persuasiveness to her pet theory. And it was apparently not just Subaru who felt that way, either, because Priscilla soon broke into a smile.

“That’s quite the bold claim, songstress— On the off chance that your judgement is mistaken, what will you do? What if the outline of the story you love so much is wrong?”

“Then I shall offer up my own neck. Liliana is only as good as her word!”

Liliana responded without hesitation, truly uncowed in the face of Priscilla’s question. Hearing that almost refreshingly boastful response, Priscilla nodded.

“Very well, then. I shall forgive your warbling and stay my merciful hand. In exchange…”

“Please leave it to me— I will take care of it.”

It was far removed from self-confidence or assurance, but Emilia clenched her fists with strong resolve.

“Hmph,” Priscilla snorted. “Do so if you can— Prove yourself worthy to be my opponent.”

Priscilla brought the topic to a close with those powerful words.

The issue of Lust's victims had been settled. The fact that this was not enough to take care of everything, though, spoke to what a terrible situation the city was facing.

The remaining big problem was just as difficult, if not more so.

"Moving on to the nameless victims who have been found so far…it is believed that they are the work of Gluttony."

That pathetically vague statement alone was proof of just how fiendish Gluttony's power was.

Several nameless victims had been found around the city after the battle concluded.

The reason they were referenced so vaguely was because there was no one who could confirm their identities. The victims of Gluttony had their names and very existences erased from the memories of everyone who knew them. In addition, they generally had no knowledge of themselves, either, so there was not a single clue about who they really were.

There were certain conditions—uniforms, surroundings, and the like—that could be used to guess at a basic identity, but that was all they had to go on.

"Gluttony's strength and the general lack of information was our downfall. And because of that, there are victims around the whole city…"

The multiple confirmed Archbishops of Gluttony—because of that missing information, the groups that fought Gluttony suffered terrible losses, and there were many more victims than expected as a result.

One of the worst off being the big beast man sitting cross-legged next to Anastasia—

"

He had suffered the grievous wound protecting a comrade in the middle of the fighting, which was undeniably the sort of thing that Ricardo would do. Even if Ricardo himself could not remember the fact that he had done so.

And Subaru accidentally tormented a certain knight by glancing at him.

“I have something important to discuss with everyone— Is there anyone who recognizes the guy next to me?”

“

conscious."

Previously, every victim of Gluttony had either their own memories eaten, like Crusch, or had their names and memories eaten, like Rem.

However, Julius only had his name eaten, making him a different sort of victim.

"So he's an exception? Forgotten by everyone, but he can remember himself… Was he connected to some of us here?"

Ferris looked at Julius with surprise.

"It would appear so." Reinhard nodded. "From the looks of it, he…Julius is a knight of considerable ability. I'm sure Ferris and I were at least acquainted with him. Quite possibly, we were closer. Friends, even."

"…At the very least, I counted the two of you among my friends."

Reinhard and Ferris looked troubled at being called a friend by someone they couldn't recognize. And it was painful to look at Julius, who accepted with sad resignation that their reaction was understandable.

Subaru didn't know when the three of them first met. He had never heard any details about how their friendship had grown, how they had come to be more than mere colleagues.

But they had certainly been friends. There had been a clear bond between them.

And now there was no trace of it to be seen.

"…Damn it…"

When Rem had her name stolen and no one remembered her, Subaru had thought there was nothing sadder than that. But Julius was there to experience it. To be left behind by the world, all alone.

Suffering was not something meant to be compared. But what Julius was going through qualified as a heartrending tragedy.

"…It's not just two friends, either."

Anastasia suddenly spoke up, having watched the friends' heartbreaking first meeting.

There was a gentle thoughtfulness in her gaze as she touched the scarf around her neck. Caressing the white fox fur, she glanced over at Ricardo.

"It was Mr. Julius there who brought Ricardo back here when he was wounded. I wondered a bit when he just up and disappeared right after, but…that's what it was, right?"

“Lady Anastasia…”

The memory of being treated like a stranger by the master he had sworn to serve with his sword and the impossible second first-encounter between lady and knight… There was an intense devotion in Julius’ voice.

Hearing that, Anastasia caught her breath.

“—Everyone, I’ve got a proposition.”

With Julius’s eyes on her, Anastasia turned her focus back to the subject at large.

“A proposition?” Kiritaka responded. “What sort of proposition might it be, given this development?”

“Everyone’s got the same broad problem, right? The people transformed by Lust and the people made nameless by Gluttony. But the Archbishops are gone without a trace, and I doubt they’ll just fess up and tell us how to fix things. We’re stuck.”

“What is the point of bringing that up now…?” Ferris winced.

“The reason she’s bringing it up is because she’s thought of something, right?”

Emilia cocked her head toward Anastasia.

“That’s right.” Anastasia shrugged. “There’s no point askin’ those nasty Archbishops. In which case, why not just ask someone else who might know the answer?”

“Someone else who might know…like someone who knows a lottt of stuff?”

“Yeah, exactly. There’s someone who fits that description perfectly in this country. Someone who knows a lottt of stuff.”

“…You don’t mean…”

Anastasia’s leading statement drew a hoarse murmur from somewhere in the room.

However, unlike everyone else, Subaru had no idea what she was implying.

If there was someone who knew how to undo the powers of the Archbishops—

“Oy, I dunno what you’re talking about, but quit mincing words and spit it out already.”

Felt, who had the same level of understanding as Subaru, glared at Anastasia.

“Sorry, sorry.” Anastasia grimaced. “Shaura, the Sage.”

“Huh?”

Felt cocked her head, scrunching her face up in thought. Subaru

was furrowing his brow with the same confusion.

"In the Kingdom of Lugunica," Julius interjected, "there were once three great champions who achieved a great feat. The Sword Saint, the Dragon Lord, and the Sage. They became known as the three heroes."

"The three heroes…"

"Right. And one of them is the Sage, Shaura. The keeper of knowledge who foresees all that will come to pass in this world."

Continuing off Julius's explanation, Anastasia softened her expression into a smile.

Anastasia looked around the room with her pale blue-green eyes.

"The Pleiades Watchtower across the Auguria Dunes at the far eastern edge of Lugunica. The legendary Sage in seclusion there might just know the answers we are trying to find."

3

"Put bluntly, I'm against it."

"…Well, I had a feeling you would be."

Subaru laughed wryly as he scratched his cheek at Otto's forceful rejection.

Otto's battered legs were still painful to look at, but he had been moved from the shelter to a proper hospital, where he was receiving attentive treatment befitting someone who had worked so hard to resolve the crisis that gripped the city.

Those were his first words after hearing what was discussed at the meeting he had missed. And it was the reaction Subaru had expected.

Because Otto Suwen knew Subaru Natsuki well.

Most people seemed to overrate him, but Beatrice, Otto, and maybe Patlash were the only ones who really had a solid evaluation of him. Possibly Ferris, too, though he was not really in a position to notice much given the issue with Crusch.

So Subaru knew all along that Otto would be against it.

"But since you know me that well, you should know my answer, too."

"…Lady Emilia aside, didn't Beatrice get upset, too?"

"My Beako is cute even when she's miffed."

Otto put his hand on his forehead in exasperation.

Subaru glanced at his legs.

"So your legs are going to be out of commission for a while, yeah?"

"It will be difficult given the state of things in Pristella. There are too many casualties, so the healers need to triage everyone. Mr. Kiritaka is apparently working to gather every healer he can find from neighboring cities, but…"

"But when your legs get this bad, only top-tier healers can really do anything?"

"And Ferris has his hands full caring for Lady Crusch."

Ferris was entirely out of the question given how precarious Crusch's situation was. And all the other healers were busy trying to treat a city's worth of patients.

"Meanwhile, our healing specialist is out running around the city and leaving his senior here in a sorry state."

Garfiel was not there. The healing specialist of Emilia's faction was using healing magic on Otto's legs at regular intervals, but he was spending the rest of his time helping rebuild the city. He was always a kindhearted kid, so it wasn't particularly strange seeing him running around aiding people in need, but—

"There's probably another reason why. As long as he doesn't push himself too hard, I think it's fine."

"It's Garfiel; he'll bring it up himself before long once he's ready. And Mimi is with him. That should help rein him in a bit, too, so he doesn't go too hard."

"Despite how she seems, Mimi has a good grasp of what's going on around her. I guess that's an older sister for you."

"I think you mean, *that's a woman for you*. But either way—"

Otto's expression tensed, and Subaru straightened up as he met Otto's gaze.

"—we still have to retrieve the Tome of Wisdom from Master Darts. I'll have to remain in Pristella. But my stance on this plan is firm—even if my objection will ultimately be a waste of time."

"Don't be so prickly. It's not just you. Garfiel is going to stay to protect the city and help out with the recovery. I don't expect the cultists to attack again, but it is a possibility."

It would be just like them to fake a withdrawal only to come storming back like an extra-large, double-fried serving of evil.

Subaru was not the only one on guard against that, though. Everyone involved was being cautious. The cultists were just that

dangerous, making everyone nervous whether they were there or not.

"However, it turns out we need more eyes to watch how things develop. Once my legs mend, I will investigate a few things myself as well. So…"

"Yeah, I know. *Please do be careful*, right?"

Subaru winked as he stole Otto's line. Otto sighed heavily and slowly lay back down in the bed.

"Sorry," Subaru added with a troubled smile. "I'll be goin' to meet this wise sage guy with the great merchant as a guide."

4

Subaru knocked on the door to be polite.

"—Come in."

There was a quiet response from inside. It was a familiar voice, but it was downcast, which rubbed Subaru the wrong way.

"Ah, it's you."

"Were you hoping for someone else?"

"It's an odd feeling, but seeing your face is quite the relief."

"Gah, bngh!"

Stepping into the room, Subaru literally gagged at the first thing Julius said.

Despite that, though, he was being considerate toward Julius in the way he shut the door behind him. Closing the door quietly was the least he could do for the people sleeping there.

"Though, it would be far easier if they actually woke up from the noise."

"If they could, would you reveal some great act and wake them up to a round of thunderous applause? That would be a valuable skill… I didn't know I could hate Gluttony more than I already did."

"Ha."

Turning away from that deflated laugh, Subaru looked around the room at all the people lying on simple beds. They were arranged in an orderly fashion, but it was by no means a peaceful scene.

They were not sleeping. These were the people who had been left behind— Forgotten from memories, walled off from everyday life, incomplete beings who were not dead, but not really alive, either.

"Julius, I know I'm one to talk, but you shouldn't just hide

away in here.”

“

the world.

“They’re breathing, though. They are undoubtedly alive. It’s a mysterious thing.”

“That’s how it goes. But they don’t eat, they don’t go to the bathroom, they don’t need to bathe. And they don’t smile…”

“And they don’t grieve being forgotten, either— That one point at least might be a blessing.”

“A blessing…?”

Subaru raised his eyebrows at that. Julius looked at him, the edge of his lips faintly softening.

“If they don’t realize they have been forgotten, they don’t have to experience the anxiety and fear of being left behind. Having the bonds with people who were once so close forcibly severed…it hits rather hard.”

“

“I know exactly how strong you are. I still remember my shame. Even if everyone else has forgotten it.”

“

Anastasia was smiling as Subaru closed the door behind him.

It was the meeting place in the shelter where the main actors had gathered a few hours ago. Everyone who had participated had long since returned to their bases to prepare for the next mission.

There was no one left in the room save the two of them.

“Hmm? Why are you staring?”

And Anastasia had been waiting for someone in that room—waiting for Subaru.

It wasn’t as if he could’ve known for sure. But he’d had a feeling that she would be there. Since by his estimate, she shouldn’t have any place to stay that felt comfortable.

“Emilia, me, and Beako, Julius and you. That makes five of us heading to the Pleiades Watchtower.”

“What a gruff way of putting it. But that’s fine. Considering our relationship, I don’t mind that level of—”

“—Cut the charade.”

“

embarrassing.”

“Over and over? There was someone besides me?”

“Priscilla Bariel. She called me she-fox. She’s a scary one.”

“Those two again, huh…”

Subaru grimaced as that pair flashed through his head again.

Honestly, Priscilla’s camp was the most unreadable of all the candidates’ factions. Priscilla herself went without saying, but Al’s secrecy had crossed a line this time as well. He probably knew far, far more than he was letting on.

But Subaru was also sure that he would not just spill the beans even if he confronted him.

“…Well, they can wait. The problem now is you pretending to be Anastasia. Yo—”

“If you’re suspecting me of being the Archbishop of Lust, you are quite mistaken. I should correct that misunderstanding first.”

The fake Anastasia interrupted to reject the expected theory, shrugging when Subaru’s glare grew sharper.

When he first suspected that Anastasia had been replaced, the obvious explanation was Lust. Capella could transform her shape and voice freely, so it would not be that difficult for her to change places with Anastasia.

Of course, he wasn’t planning to just accept that answer, but—

“Then who are you, and what are you trying to accomplish?”

“—Echidna.”

“Honestly, given the situation, it’s understandable why you might assume I’ve taken over Ana’s body. That’s why I was reluctant to tell the truth sooner. But seeing that keeping quiet about it just needlessly aroused suspicions reminds me once again that lies are really bad. It’s truly regrettable.”

Subaru was still locked up while the fake kept blathering. Her words went in one ear and out the other as he refused to look away from the strange sight in front of him.

A middle-aged sort of tone, a circuitous, indirect manner of speech. It all resembled that Witch.

“What a terrible joke. You’re Echidna…?”

“?”

That was the name of the Witch whom Subaru was reluctant to refer to by name under any circumstances.

The Witch who invited guests to her tea party with sweet, kind words while turning them into puppets that obeyed her will. The manifestation of curiosity in search of all the possibilities that she could not see for herself.

The name of someone he had been so sure he would never have to hear again.

“When did you take Anastasia’s form…? No, more importantly, when did you become able to freely move outside…? Were you the one who set all this up with the cultists?!”

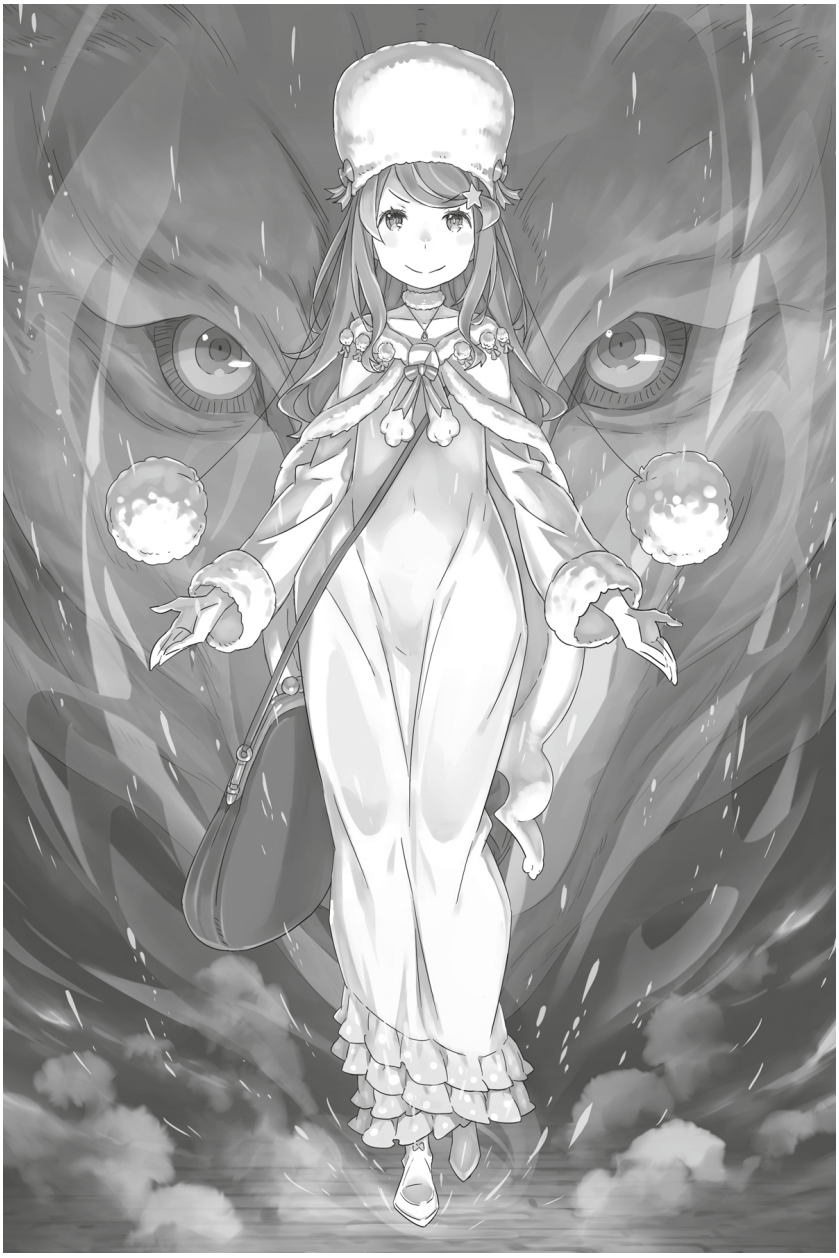
“Huh? Hmm, wait a second, I wasn’t expecting that strong a reaction…”

“Shut it! Nothing good ever comes from letting you talk! What are you planning this time…? What were you trying to get me do?! Shit! Was I just dancing in the palm of your hand again?!”

“C-could you please calm down? I suspect there has been a grave misunderstanding.”

Returning to his senses, Subaru ferociously tore into Anastasia —no, Echidna.

Echidna hugged herself, stepping back, sensing danger from Subaru’s outburst. He seemed to be on the verge of trying to strangle her.



“Calm down? There’s no way I can calm down! How many times do you think I’m going to fall for that gentle act, you piece-of-shit Witch! What did you do with Anastasia?!”

“I’d appreciate it if you spared me the evil-mastermind treatment. In the first place, I never had any intention of harming Ana. I’ve been with her for more than ten years now. If anything, I think of her like family.”

“*Evil mastermind* fits you to a… Wait, more than ten years?”

Subaru’s eyes widened in open suspicion. If it had been that long, then that would have meant Echidna had been coming and going from the Sanctuary all she wanted.

It was obvious when he thought about it. The whole thing about Echidna not being able to leave her tomb was just something he had heard from her, and yet he had simply accepted it at face value.

Even though he had suffered so much for trusting her sweet talk, how naive was he?

“Is it that enjoyable to trick and manipulate people for your own amusement?”

“…Well, now. I can’t say I was expecting this level of animosity. I had suspected it might be the case when I saw you walking around with Beatrice, but it seems you know my creator well.”

“*Well?* Try *terribly*.”

As Subaru’s anger intensified, Echidna’s attitude grew cooler and cooler. Honestly, that attitude was pissing him off, too. It was getting to the point where anything Echidna did made him mad.

“Whatever you have planned, you won’t fool me. Using those cultists to—”

“—Artificial. Spirit.”

“…What…?”

“It seems like you are painfully hung up on my name, but I suspect it might be a little easier for us to talk if you would focus a little bit more on the other half of my introduction.”

Saying that, Echidna sat down in a chair and gestured for Subaru to take a seat as well. Silently rejecting it, he rolled those two words over in his mouth.

“You’re saying you’re an artificial spirit, too? Like Beako? You? An artificial spirit? You?”

“The answer isn’t going to change however many times you ask. To elaborate, my real form is this fox muffler Ana is usually wearing. So I’ve been watching all of you the whole time.”

“

that?”

“That attitude! Like you don’t understand how the people you’re dealing with are feeling! That’s just like Echidna!”

“I’d venture to say that I understand you despise my creator.”

It had gone well past anger; there was pure hatred gleaming in Subaru’s eyes. Seeing that, Foxidna slowly shook her head.

“Could you please consider for a moment, if I really were the Echidna who you knew, then why would I reveal that fact here and now? If I knew it would break off any chance at all of talking with you, there wouldn’t be any reason to do it, would there?”

“…The explanation that you’re the sort of person who would enjoy doing that is an answer in itself.”

“If her sins run that deep, then there’s nothing I can say. My creator was just too terrible.”

Foxidna’s bitter expression was one Subaru had never seen on Anastasia’s face. But as he started to actually talk with her, he began to realize the oddities himself.

True, it isn’t logical. And if I use that argument, then there will never be an end to the suspicions—

“Suppose for the sake of argument that you are not the same Echidna that I know. Then how did you know Beatrice is an artificial spirit? That’s too convenient a fact to know when you’ve supposedly lost your memories.”

“I could tell when I saw her is all I can say. Like a sense that picks up fellow artificial spirits.”

“Beatrice never mentioned anything about you. Why didn’t she notice you, then? Are you trying to call my girl stupid?”

“I imagine she would have noticed if she ever saw me active or talking. Other than that, I wouldn’t be surprised if she didn’t catch it. I’m a being lacking in a lot of ways compared with a normal spirit.”

“Lacking?”

“I’m unable to contract with a human. It is difficult for me to use magic to defend myself as well. In exchange, I am good at concealing my presence. Though my confidence in that has certainly taken a beating after all this.”

Subaru felt something off about the way Foxidna lowered her gaze and how her voice became less energetic. Slowly, he realized the implication behind what she was saying.

If she’s also an artificial spirit, then—

“The artificial spirit they demanded—”

“Might well have been me, not Beatrice. Ana was troubled by the decision not to reveal it to all of you. The blame for that lies with me. I’m the one who stopped her. Allow me to apologize.”

Foxidna lowered her head as Subaru remembered the conversation he’d had with Anastasia before the decisive battle with the Archbishops.

She had pulled him aside about an important discussion, and she had seemed to be hung up on the topic of the artificial spirit and looked unsure about something.

“Anastasia was unsure about whether to tell me then?”

“Because you said that keeping secrets would only help the enemy. Ana struggled a great deal with that.”

“

“Can we get this over with?”

“Sorry, I was just a little shaken that this somehow ended up with you willing to actually listen to me.”

That exchange felt eerily similar to talking with the real Echidna, but apologizing for the mistake, Foxidna started speaking with a serious expression on her face.

“Bluntly speaking, using Ana’s Odo as a medium, I have overwritten her consciousness with my own. At present, I can freely control her body, and I can also use magic with Ana’s defective Gate.”

“Anastasia’s Gate is defective?”

“That’s one key aspect of our special relationship. I mentioned before that I’m defective as a spirit and can’t form a contract, right?”

“…You did. So it’s not like Anastasia is a spirit user or anything?”

Remembering that previous exchange, Subaru clarified for himself that he and Anastasia were in different situations. They were both partners with artificial spirits—Beatrice and Foxidna—but their partnerships took different forms.

Nodding, Foxidna continued:

“Ana has had defective Gate from birth. As I imagine you know, Gate is an organ that absorbs atmospheric mana and is a release for the mana that accumulates in the body. In Ana’s case, the absorption function is what’s nonfunctional. She’s in a chronic state of mana deprivation. You actually know someone with the opposite problem, whose Gate can’t release mana, don’t you?”

“I can’t say I do…”

“That’s surprising. It’s the descendant of the Sword Saint. He cannot expel mana from his body. In his case, he absorbs an abnormal amount of mana, though it seems it’s all used to increase his physical capabilities, so there is no harm caused.”

“…Reinhard.”

He learned the unexpected problem Reinhard had from Foxidna’s passing comment. It was true that Reinhard himself had said that he could not use magic. Subaru hadn’t explored the matter very deeply, but this was apparently why.

“It’s a similar condition to me after I broke my Gate by overloading it, huh? In my case, Beako absorbs the mana, so I get by without any ruptures, though…”

“In his case, he depletes mana just by living… However, for Ana, the amount of mana that she absorbs is insufficient. Because of that, she can only use her internal mana for magic, and once that runs out, the only choice is to exhaust Odo, the foundation of life.”

“Which is why Anastasia can’t use magic, and why she can’t contract with a spirit, either, since it requires a supply of mana…”

Subaru was starting to grasp the situation surrounding Anastasia’s Gate, but there was also a part that still didn’t make sense.

“But that isn’t going to suddenly fix itself while you are borrowing her body. Isn’t that little mana she has what’s keeping you running?”

“…The only reason that we resorted to something that shaved away at her life was because she was in such a dangerous position to begin with. Of course, I talked it over with Ana in advance and got permission before taking over. And beyond that, you don’t have any right to say anything about it.”

There was a fierce resolve in her eyes, making it clear that she would never yield on that point, if nothing else. Even if they did not have an official contract, it was a promise that still bound Anastasia and Foxidna. Just as the contract between Subaru and Beatrice was theirs alone. It wasn’t Subaru’s place to comment or pass judgment.

“My borrowing Ana’s body is an act of desperation. I am a particularly low-consumption spirit and have never once burdened Ana with my mana needs.”

“Oh, really? In my case, Beako has to hold my hand three times a day to get enough mana.”

“The second and third times are probably just because she wants to hold hands. But it’s nice that you get along that well.”

Foxidna giggled, just like the Witch whom Subaru knew. Seeing Anastasia’s body overlap with Echidna’s was a scary feeling.

He wanted to get Anastasia back to normal as soon as possible. Both for his own sake and for the sake of Julius, who was in a painful enough situation already.

“Is this your first time borrowing her body?”

“No, this is the fourth time. But this is the first time there has been any issue going back. It’s never happened before, so I have no clue what the cause might be… I’ve stopped being able to extract myself from her body. As a result, Ana’s consciousness is sleeping in the depths of her Odo.”

Touching her chest, the spirit spoke as if that was where the Odo was located.

“I was surprised you were able to see through the fact that I’m not Ana. But I was a little relieved, too… I didn’t like the idea that she could be so easily copied.”

For the first time, Subaru could agree wholeheartedly with what Foxidna was saying.

It was impossible for someone to perfectly replicate someone else. She could not become Anastasia. That was a relief for Foxidna and for Subaru as well.

“…I’m sure there were plenty of other people who thought it was weird. Even if they couldn’t declare it immediately on the spot with conviction, I’m sure the people who know her best noticed right away.”

“And yet it’s people without that much connection, you and Priscilla Bariel, who were the only ones to see through it. Can you explain that?”

“Ricardo and the kittens all have their hands full with what happened to them at the moment. And the same goes for Julius.”

Foxidna’s eyes narrowed.

That reaction looked suspicious to Subaru, but he could understand after hearing what came next.

“I had the feeling it might be the case, but Julius really is Ana’s knight? …Gluttony’s power is truly terrifying. Even robbing an unnatural being like me of my memories.”

“Yeah. But that’s why we’re…”

Suddenly, Subaru snapped his head up.

He finally understood why Foxidna had brought up the famous Sage during the meeting and why she had suggested going to the Pleiades Watchtower.

“I love Ana.”

“

Anastasia's body.

Just like how Puck loved Emilia, and how Beatrice loved Subaru. Foxidna seemed to feel the same toward Anastasia—

"Then that's the real reason you wanted to meet the Sage."

"Correct— Honestly, I don't feel any particular way about the victims of Gluttony and Lust. I just want to know how to return Ana's body to her. And I will gladly use all of you in order to achieve that."

"Do you have any proof that the Sage will know how to revert things?"

"None whatsoever. But if it is the Sage who is said to see through everything and have knowledge on all matters, then there is at least a chance. And I will always choose the option most likely to succeed. Nothing more and nothing less."

Subaru gulped. It was undoubtedly a selfish, egotistical conclusion. But Foxidna had her reasons and the resolve to act decisively in order to achieve her goals.

There was no mistaking that. In which case, there was something Subaru had to confirm—

"Can I trust that you really know how to get to the Pleiades Watchtower?"

"Of course."

"Your lore is supposed to be that you don't have any memories. So how do you know the way to the tower, which no one else knows how to reach? Doesn't make much sense, does it?"

"I know what I know. If you ask me for some sort of proof, then I'm not sure what I can say…but if I had to put it into words, I guess because it is my fate to reach that place."

"Fate? Who decided that?"

"My creator, I suppose."

Foxidna's suspicions were the worst possible answer as far as Subaru was concerned. It was hard not to believe that Echidna was the one who had created her, and Echidna was just the sort of asshole who would etch the path to the watchtower and nothing else into an artificial spirit's memory, too.

Which meant that there was something connected with Echidna waiting at the Pleiades Watchtower. That fact made him nervous while simultaneously getting his hopes up about the knowledge of the Sage, who was waiting there.

"Are you willing to believe me?"

Foxidna asked this when he fell silent, reaching his conclusion. Subaru hesitated to nod, sighing deeply before he answered:

"*Belief* is a strong word, but for the moment, I understand. You have your own goal and are doing what you need to in order to achieve it. And that goal and those actions are not at odds with our goal."

"Quite. We both have our own questions to ask the Sage, so let's work together to get there. It's only natural."

"Quit it. When you put it like that, you sound a hell of a lot shadier."

"That's rude."

Subaru was sure that any more talking with Foxidna in Anastasia's body was going to drive him mad.

But either way, the road to the Pleiades Watchtower would be a long one. The Auguria Dunes, where it was located, lay in the far eastern regions of the map—and he would have travel with Foxidna the whole way.

"Incidentally, this is just to satisfy my curiosity, but…you seem to know quite a lot about my creator. Who was Echidna?"

"What…? Right, there wasn't much left of her in the records supposedly."

Subaru scrunched his face at Foxidna's unexpected question.

Looking back at the histories, the story went that the Witch of Envy destroyed all the other Witches of the Seven Deadly Sins, and none of their names remained. Because of that, the only people who would make the connection between the concept of a Witch and Echidna were the people who had a direct connection with her—Emilia's faction.

And—

"—Our relationship scores aren't high enough for me to talk about her with you. I'll tell you more once I have a better idea of whether I can trust you."

"

Anastasia's usual style of speech.

I see. It really is a good performance. But…

"The intonation when you say *y'all* is off. And your Kansai drawl is too smooth. It's too realistic compared with the other Kararagi people I've heard."

"Too realistic?"

Taking Subaru's unfriendly advice to heart, Foxidna was sincerely trying to correct the apparent problems, but it was not something that could be addressed that easily. Finally, she sighed, her shoulders slumping as she gave up.

And the questions Subaru had for Foxidna were done for the moment. The question of how to return Anastasia's body to her would be up to what they learned from the Sage.

But what he could say was—

"Don't tell Julius or anyone else that you're borrowing Anastasia's body."

"…I don't mind, but I didn't expect you to say that."

"I know it's selfish to propose this, but I don't want to cause any more waves in this already super-precarious moment. I should warn you that everyone else isn't nearly as understanding as I am. It'll be a problem if they get tripped up because of it."

If Ricardo or Mimi and her brothers found out, they might try to stop them out of concern for Anastasia's body.

If that meant having to give up on going to the watchtower, they would lose out on the only clue they had on helping the victims of Gluttony and Lust, and that would be problematic in a whole new way.

"If we go to the watchtower and find out how to fix everything for Lust's and Gluttony's victims and how to solve your and Anastasia's problems, then everything will be fine. If it all works out, then they can't complain, and even if they do, we don't have to listen."

"As Hoshin said, *as long as the accounts balance, all's well that ends well*."

As per usual, couldn't say it better than Hoshin even if I tried.

With that, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief now that the conversation had finally come to an end.

There had been a chance that whoever was pretending to be Anastasia was plotting something malicious and that one last fight would have to unfold there. But fortunately, he had not had to use

the insurance he had arranged.

“Incidentally, Natsuki.”

“Hmm?”

“There’s someone else you want to ask the Sage on how to help, too, isn’t there?”

Subaru stopped as he turned to leave the room. His heart leaped at those words.

Looking back, Foxidna was smiling with Anastasia’s face, but her tone slipped back to her own voice for a brief moment.

“There are other people with the same sort of symptoms as the nameless here, right? And it would be best to have an example to show the Sage in order to ask how to help them, right?”

“That’s…”

“We’re going to stop by Marquis Mathers’s estate anyway, aren’t we? You have to prepare for the trip and report back about going to the watchtower, after all. And you have your Sleeping Beauty waiting there.”

“

hear anything?"

Subaru shrugged at Reinhard, who had moved beside him.

Before going to talk to Foxidna, he had asked Reinhard to wait outside in case anything happened.

It was entirely possible that the suspicion he felt about Anastasia was actually because of Capella, so it was only natural to buy the best insurance he could afford before confronting that possibility.

Fortunately, the fight he had been worried about never materialized, but the Sword Saint Reinhard had surely heard the conversation in the room—that Anastasia was currently being inhabited by Foxidna.

Honestly, Subaru would like to keep things quiet in order to not cause a stir, but—

"Unfortunately, I could not hear the conversation inside, so I can't tell anyone about what was discussed. Even if it was Lady Felt asking me."

"…Thanks, man…"

He thanked Reinhard, who understood what he was thinking and preempted the discussion.

Thinking back on it, he had constantly been saved by Reinhard's presence ever since coming to the city. Obviously, there was the whole thing with rescuing Emilia, but it had also been a huge help being able to fall back on him in situations like this.

"If it weren't for you, there would have been a lot more dangerous situations, and I probably wouldn't have been able to save Emilia. Seriously, I'm grateful, Reinhard."

"Allow me to say the same thing to you. On top of that, if I was able to be your strength, then it was an honor to be of service—all the more reason, though, I would ask you to be cautious."

"Yeah, I know. It's a long road ahead, and more than anything…"

Subaru narrowed his eyes when Reinhard lowered his voice, and the smile left the Sword Saint's face. It was clear what was troubling Reinhard. Since—

"…it's the Auguria Dunes, which even you couldn't pass."

"

The Auguria Dunes in the east of Lugunica were supposedly a den of vicious demon beasts, a monster-infested world that the Sword Saint Reinhard had tried, and failed, to cross once before.

And the Sage, Shaura, who was said to know everything, lived at the farthest edge of that desert—

"Two years ago, when the king and the rest of the royal family fell ill, I set out for the Pleiades Watchtower in search of a cure by the order of the council… But I failed."

There was a powerful sense of embarrassment in Reinhard's voice as he spoke of his lack of ability.

There was probably no stranger combination than Reinhard and powerlessness, which spoke to just how much he regretted what happened and how hard he took his failure.

"No matter how far you went, the tower never seemed to draw any closer. That's what you said, right?"

"…Most likely, it was some sort of barrier. And I was unable to overcome it."

In the end, a way to treat the illness that afflicted the royal family had not been found in time, which was why the selection for the throne that all the royal candidates were taking part in had come about in the first place.

"And now of all times, we finally find a way to get through the desert."

"If she…if Lady Anastasia is to be believed, then yes."

He corrected himself in line with his promise to Subaru. Reading between the lines, though, he was asking if they could trust Foxidna's statement.

"

“Indeed. She will no doubt complain, but I will be sure that Lady Felt is careful.”

Reinhard’s expression softened as he thought of the lady he was serving. Seeing the smile finally return to Reinhard’s face, Subaru narrowed his gaze at the change in the relationship between the two of them.

Felt and Reinhard seemed totally at odds with each other at first, but now, while they were still not quite working in lockstep, they were undoubtedly moving forward together. And while they were theoretically his opponents, that thought made Subaru oddly happy.

But at the same time—

“Reinhard, are you okay?”

—Subaru was surprised by how easily that faint sense of something being off came to his lips in the form of a question.

Reinhard seemed similarly surprised, but he blinked his blue eyes.

“…That’s a rather vague question.”

“Ah, no, I’m not really sure how to put it, but…I guess a lot happened with your grandmother, huh?”

There was only one thing he could think of to explain the odd feeling he got from Reinhard.

He had heard from Wilhelm that matters had been settled with Reinhard’s grandmother, the previous Sword Saint, who was supposed to have died fifteen years ago. But Wilhelm had not mentioned anything about any pain Reinhard had felt. It was only natural he might have felt a shock that was impossible to put into words when he knew his grandmother had died again.

Reinhard was the strongest Sword Saint, but it wasn’t like his heart was made of steel.

But Reinhard shook his head, brushing off Subaru’s concern.

“I’m okay, Subaru. I finished saying my farewells to Grandmother— So I am fine.”

“I…see… Well, if you say so.”

Subaru withdrew his concern. He could not say for sure what Reinhard was feeling, but if he was going to say he was fine, then there was nothing else for Subaru to do. However…

“If you ever need a shoulder to lean on and can’t talk about it with Felt, just let me know. We’re pals, right?”

“…Got it. If that time ever comes, I shall be sure to do so, pal.”

Subaru raised his hand lightly, leaving that last note while trying not to work Reinhard up too much.

Reinhard paused for a moment, and then he smiled wryly and nodded.

He nodded, so he's probably okay.

After all, Reinhard was the sort of guy who kept his promises, unlike Subaru.

7

"Ah, Subaru! Where did you go?"

"Oh, Emilia-tan. Sorry, sorry. I just had a lot of little things to take care of."

Subaru was walking through the passage of the shelter after leaving Reinhard when Emilia and Beatrice found him and hurried over to him.

"I heard you went to see Mr. Ju—I mean, Julius—but I got worried when we went to check the hospital room and you weren't there."

"I did go to visit, but he has that depressing look on his face no matter how long he looks at the victims. So, it wasn't exactly a change of pace, but at least a change of scenery."

"Really? Julius has a handsome face, though…"

"Argh, you think that, too, Emilia-tan?"

"Ah. But your face is also nice, Subaru! There's something about it that stands out the more you look at it!"

"Gah. That was not really your best recovery, you know!"

Emilia quickly corrected herself, but even if she changed the way she was saying it, it was still basically the same point. Subaru grimaced a bit as Beatrice grabbed his sleeve.

"Hmm?"

"Subaru." Beatrice's voice was quiet. "Call on Betty if you are doing something dangerous. It isn't safe to let you go alone. The thought is disconcerting."

"…I gotta say, I'm feeling the same about you more and more. You're so cute, I just start worrying whether you might get kidnapped by a stranger with candy."

"Betty is not so tawdry a spirit! Don't mock me!"

Beatrice responded indignantly, hitting Subaru in the side over and over. He lifted her up to her surprise and started walking

together with Emilia.

"? What is it, Emilia-tan?"

Suddenly, he noticed Emilia looking up at him as they walked.

"Is it that strange to see me playing with Beako?"

"No, that's totally normal at this point. Besides, it's a contractor's duty to look after their spirit. Cuddling Beatrice is your job."

"She said 'cuddle'! But in that case, doesn't that idea fall apart a little when it comes to you and Puck? I don't really remember seeing you looking after him."

"Don't pick nits! And I also did lots of things for Puck while you weren't watching. Brushing his hair, clipping his claws, sleeping while hugging him…"

It was debatable whether Emilia made a good role model for how to take care of a spirit. Still, Emilia's face was bright and cheerful while she talked about Puck.

—A colorless crystal pendant was hanging around her neck.

It was the same design as the one she had never taken off before she was separated from Puck. Noticing Subaru's gaze, Emilia touched the crystal with her slender fingers.

"There's not enough mana stored up yet for Puck to come out, but I just have to be patient for a little while longer. After all, my link with Puck never broke even after everything."

"All thanks to Beako's hard work, and we should be grateful to Kiritaka for his generosity, too."

They had originally intended to negotiate with Kiritaka for the stone, but he had kindly just given it to Emilia as thanks for saving the city.

With that, they had accomplished the original goal they had set out to Pristella to achieve. However, they had also gained many more weighty goals while there.

—And Subaru was left wondering whether there was something he could have done to get things to turn out better.

"Hey, look there, Subaru."

"? What is it? Did something happen…?"

Subaru turned around when Emilia suddenly poked his shoulder. Emilia's expression softened as she pointed, and following her gaze, he caught his breath.

In the distance, they could see the scars of battle that now marked Pristella's neighborhoods. It was the handiwork of the

cultists, the rampaging demi-beasts, and the hard fighting Subaru and everyone else had been a part of.

And amid that battered scene, there was a boy and a girl holding hands and running through the street. Both of their faces were familiar, and there was relief and even a smile on their faces.

“Lusbel and Tina…”

The two children who had been put in danger by the cultists’ malicious actions.

Subaru had seen their deaths, their tears, and their earnest struggles several times already. To see the two children he had so badly wanted to save running hand in hand through the streets…

There had been countless tragedies in Pristella, and it was perhaps imprudent to let himself rejoice at the fact that just the two of them were safe and sound, but—

“But that is what you, and me, and everyone else achieved.”

“

“Pinkie swear. If I lie, I’ll swallow a thousand needles.”

“Pinkie swear.”

He let go of her finger. She still was holding out her finger as she smiled at him.

“How many needles is that now?”

“Well, now. I don’t think I’ve gotten to ten thousand.”

“Then make sure you keep it that way, please?”

Subaru nodded.

There was no way that answer would ease Emilia’s mind. And that was not why she had made him promise.

That promise was a warning for him.

No one would blame you.

Foxidna’s last words echoed in his ears.

Apparently, no one would blame him. But was that actually true?

Would anyone forgive Subaru Natsuki for taking advantage of the circumstances?

“I’ll find an answer. Before we get back to the manor.”

Still though, I guess it’s to be expected of someone with the same name as that Witch, but she really hit the weakest point in my heart dead-on.

“I’m not looking forward to this…”

“Did you say something?”

“Nothing important. I was just thinking I can spank Beako all I want carrying her like this.”

“What did you just say?! Let Betty down this instant! Gently, like a dainty flower!”

“Ha-ha-ha.”

“Stop laughing while spanking Betty!!!”

Still carrying Beatrice while she made a fuss, Subaru followed after Emilia as she walked forward. She glanced back, as if wanting to get involved in the fun.

Even though I’m this lucky…this blessed…

Subaru was disgusted by the depths of his own greed, but he still found himself wishing there was one more girl who could be there with them, too.

With that, the curtain finally fell on Subaru Natsuki’s battle in Pristella.

—A quiet moment passes before pressing onward to the next

story of reaching the desert tower.

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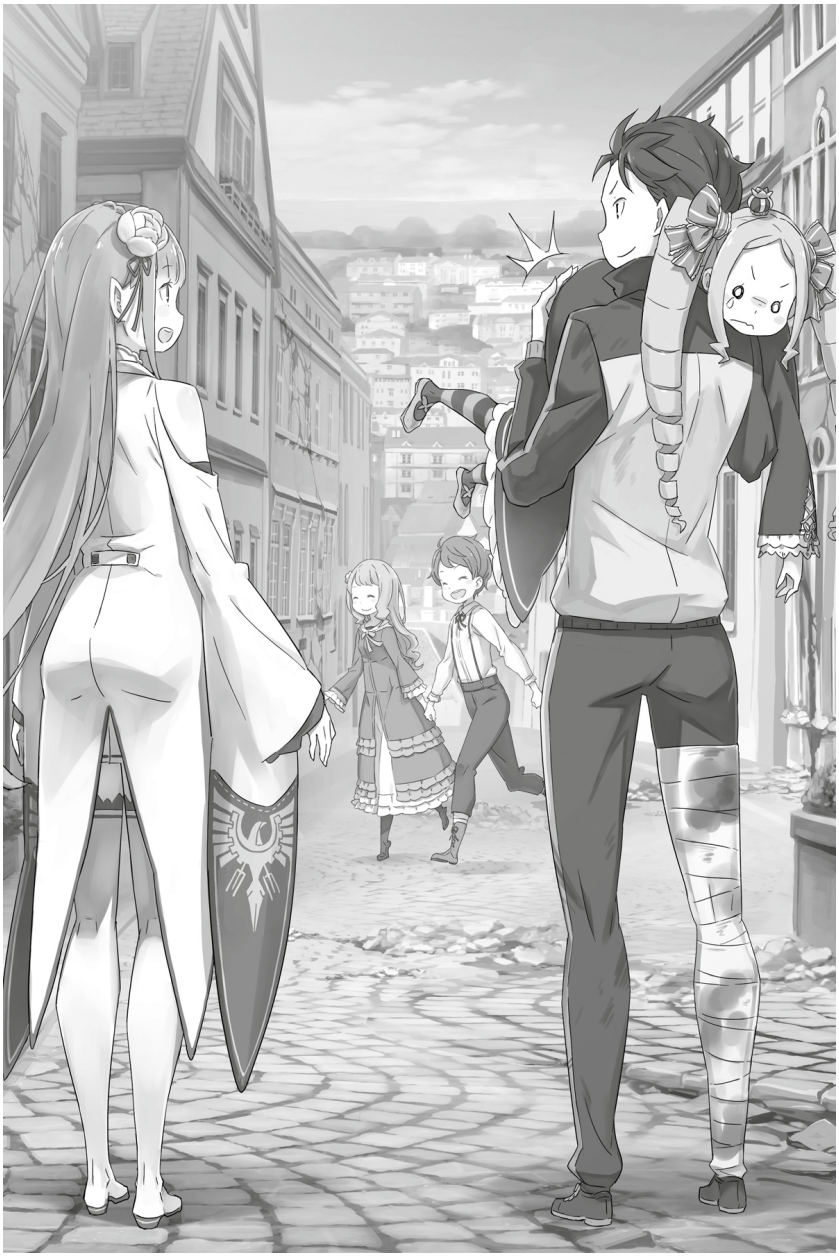


AFTERWORD

Hooray! That's the end of *Re:ZERO*'s fifth arc!

Hello again, this is Tappei Nagatsuki, the mouse-colored cat.

Thank you very much for joining me for Volume 20!

However, for those of you who have already finished the book, you might be thinking, *That wasn't exactly a feel-good, hip-hip-hooray, happily-ever-after sort of ending!* And you would be correct!

I hadn't thought about it in great a deal of depth or anything, but looking back on previous arcs, the odd arcs have had particularly strong lead-ins to the next story, while the even arcs tend to have somewhat cleaner conclusions.

So with the fifth arc's lead-in, I am sure the sixth arc will have a nice and clean conclusion.

Not even the author knows for sure whether that will be true, though! Surprisingly, works like this are a bit of a gamble!

Of course, the general progression of the story is more or less settled by the time I start writing in earnest, but it is not uncommon for things to take a sharp turn while writing. Characters speak and act for themselves, villains concoct plots that surpass the author's imagination, more main characters die than expected, and all sorts of other things can happen!

And so the fifth arc was quite intricate, but it feels like the sixth arc will turn things up to eleven, so I hope you will continue to follow along!

A single page of afterword is really short! I can't write anything! Because I wrote too much already!

Having reached this sadly familiar portion of the page, allow me to turn to the customary thanks.

To Editor I, we made it through the fifth arc. It was difficult weaving all the through lines together, but thanks to your help, we managed to get through it. Thank you very much!

To the illustrator, Otsuka, the cover illustrations for the fifth arc have been quite challenging from the Archbishops onward, but the cover for this conclusion of the arc this time was marvelous! Thank you so much!

To the designer, Kusano, the innovative illustration with the three generations of the Astrea family together was also a fitting conclusion to Theresia and Wilhelm's story! Thank you!

In *Gekkan Comic Alive*, Matsuse's manga adaption of part 3 reached its finale, and the *Love Ballad of the Sword Devil* series is doing well, too! Volumes of both are going on sale the same month, and I'm truly in their debt!

To everyone else at MF Bunko J's editorial department, all the proofreaders, and all the bookstores, thank you very much for all your work as always!

And finally, my deepest gratitude to all the readers who continue to support this series.

The sixth arc will be starting next volume; the second OVA, *The Frozen Bond*, will start this fall; and the second season of the anime is very much on the way, so there's lots more *Re:ZERO* content to come!

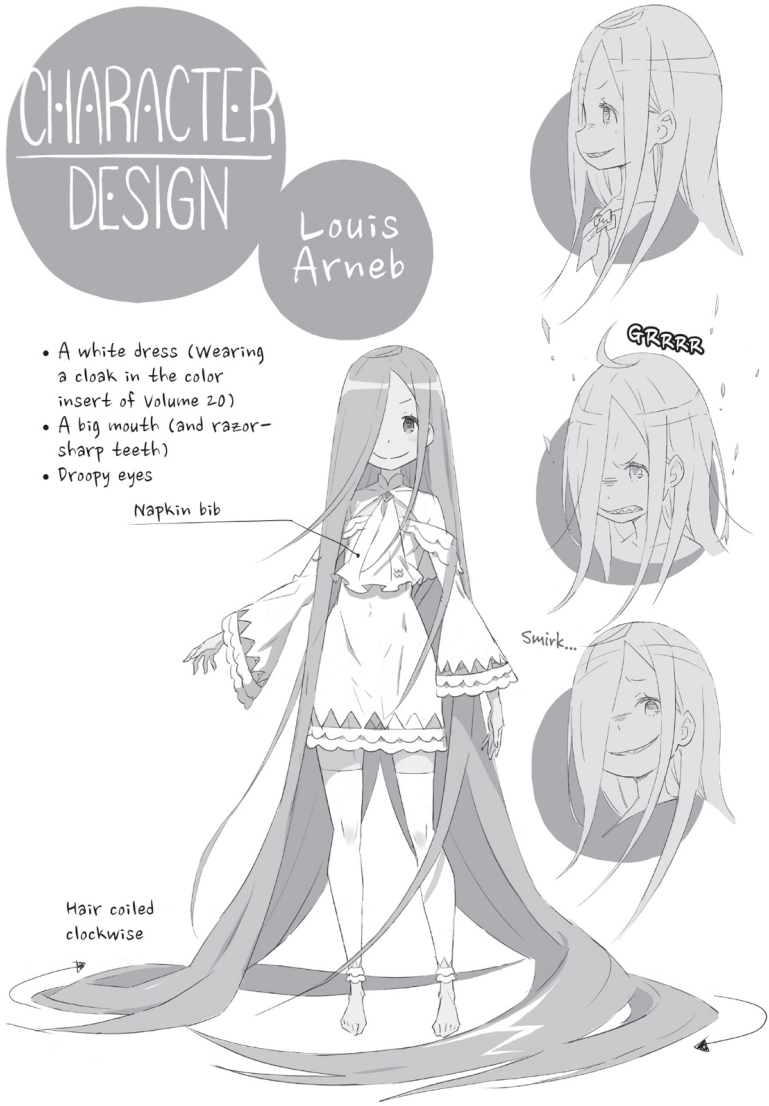
I hope you'll continue to join me, and let's meet again in Volume 21!

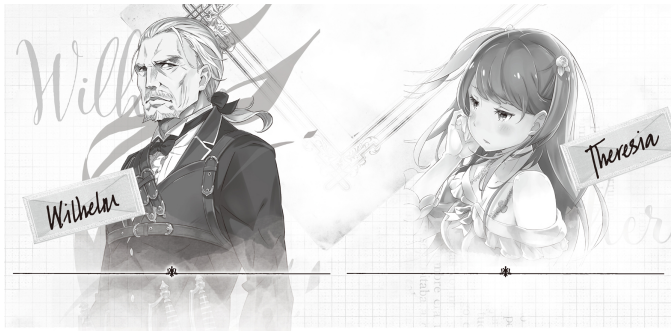
May 2019

<<The start of the Reiwa era! Time to turn over a new leaf>>

CHARACTER DESIGN

Louis Arneb


• A white dress (Wearing a cloak in the color insert of Volume 20)
• A big mouth (and razor-sharp teeth)
• Droopy eyes
Napkin bib
Hair coiled clockwise
GRRRR
Smirk...



“Oh my, to think someone else would come here at a time like this.”

“…What’s a woman like you doing here?”

“Me? I was just waiting for someone. Would you mind chatting a bit while I wait?”

“…Go ahead and talk if you want.”

“In that case, I’ll take you up on your offer. First of all, the continuation of this book, Volume 21, is planned to release in September. The fifth arc finished this time, so apparently, the story will be entering its sixth arc. It’s hard to look away, isn’t it?”

“Sir Subaru and Lady Emilia are setting out for the far reaches of the desert where the Sage resides. It is the very same Pleiades Watchtower that even Re…the Sword Saint could not manage to overcome, so it will be interesting to see how they attempt the challenge.”

“Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, I understand what you mean. Also, the fifth collection of short stories is going on sale that same month. I don’t know what stories will be included in it, but do you suppose there might be a story about the two of us?”

“

“Hmmm, no, there’s still more. For example, MF Bunko J’s annual summer event is happening in July, and there is going to be a *Re:ZERO* stage there.”

“And?”

“I guess that the second OVA of *The Frozen Bond* will be airing in theaters in fall 2019.”

“And…”

“Ah yes. And also that I love you.”

“—Ngh.”

“Sorry, looks like I was first.”

“…You don’t need to apologize for something like that. I should say it myself—”

“You don’t need to say it. I know it perfectly well already. You—”

“I truly—”

“—love me.”

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